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JOSH THE BOY TENDERFOOT; OR, THE Wild Men of Buzzard Bar.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "BLIZZARD BEN," "YOUNG KENTUCK," ETC., ETC.



NEARER AND NEARER THE YOUNG TENDERFOOT CREPT, WHILE FOSTER STILL LOOKED AND LISTENED, UNCONSCIOUS OF THE PERIL BEHIND HIM.

Josh, the Boy Tenderfoot;

OR,
The Wild Men of Buzzard Bar.

A Story of Colorado.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "BLIZZARD BEN," "YOUNG KENTUCK," "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMERERO," "LADY JAGUAR,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRICE OF A MINE.

Two men were riding through a mountainous region of Colorado, in the heart of Gunnison county, at a pace which showed no sign of haste.

The place was wild and beautiful in the extreme, with its succession of ridges and valleys, its great cliffs and yawning canyons, for all the Gunnison is in one way or another handsome.

Still, these two horsemen paid no attention to the scenery. Chasms yawned at their feet one moment, and lofty peaks, pine-clad, towered above them the next; but one of the two had crossed the spur many times before, and the other had matters of more importance on his mind.

The former was a young man whose every look bespoke him a citizen of Colorado; the latter, a man of sixty years, had the dress and air of a man of the extreme East.

He was speaking earnestly as they rode through a gulch.

"If matters are as you say, Mr. Wilbur, there will probably be a long lawsuit," he observed.

Paul Wilbur looked at him in surprise.

"Bless your soul! how can there be? Buzzard Bar don't own a judge, or a justice, or a jury. There's nobody to try the case."

"Then how am I to recover my property?"

"Easy as rolling off a log. Walk up to Jared Thayer and Peter Foster, and say, 'My name is Randolph Barr. I own the mine you are working, and here are the papers to prove it. I'll give you two hours to get out of the claim!'"

"But they may not go."

"Then you must argue with them."

"But even after that they may refuse to give up the property."

"Probably; you don't understand me, Mr. Barr. It is all well enough to say to these men, 'I am the rightful owner of the Cinnamon mine. I bought the concern while I was in Washington, paid my money and secured my deed. I sent a lawyer to examine the same, but he came back and told me it was a salted claim. So I settled back and remained quiet for a year, when I heard that you gentlemen were working the mine and getting rich. Now I have come for my own.' That's all very well, in its way, but you want to do more."

"What is that, Mr. Wilbur?"

"Use a revolver argument."

"I do not understand."

"Well, sir, here in the West we are frequently obliged to enforce our rights by the power of sixes, alias revolvers. I have seen a bit of the life myself, during the six years I've been here, and I assure you a man must give as well as take. Therefore, if Thayer and Foster conclude to stick, you must load your six-shooter and argue with them through the medium of lead."

Randolph Barr gazed at the speaker in utter astonishment. He had been worrying all the way from Washington to the Gunnison for fear that he could not secure a good lawyer when once on Colorado soil, and now he was informed that that particular section to which he was going had neither lawyers, judges, justices or juries.

It was the second great surprise he had lately received.

The first came when he learned that the mine he had supposed worthless was being worked by other parties.

How he became its possessor, the reader has already seen, but he never supposed that his chosen agent had played him false until a few weeks before. When he did discover this, he had promptly started for the Gunnison, and now only a few miles separated him from Buzzard Bar, near which was the mine in question.

At Crested Butte he had secured the services of Paul Wilbur, a veteran prospector, though young in years, and the latter, having no love for Thayer & Foster, himself, intended to see the matter through and Mr. Barr in possession of his rights.

He had raised a flurry in the old gentleman's mind by intimating that revolvers might be

used in the case, but, really, he did not expect anything of the kind. Very likely the illegal workers of the mine would rebel at first, but Paul had a very convincing way when he went into a scheme to win, and he fully believed Thayer & Foster would pack their baggage and surrender the claim.

"Do you intend to settle in Colorado?" Paul continued, after a pause.

"I hardly think I will," said Mr. Barr, his mind running on the previous conversation. "I shall try to dispose of my mine. I am an old man, and all I have left me in this world is my daughter, Nora. She needs the softening influences of civilization at her age—she is eighteen—and Colorado would hardly be the proper place for her."

Paul did not answer. He really cared little for his companion's plans, but his mind drifted back to the time he had himself left an Eastern home, at the age of twenty, to seek his fortune in the land of gold.

"I must give up this wild life and return to Ohio," he was thinking. "Mother and my sister are there, and, maybe, all the girls are not married. I believe I'll dispose of my property here and start for the old home."

The wide-awake, observing way he had before shown now vanished, and the two horsemen advanced with a thoughtful air, forgetful of all around them. They were passing through a canyon and their horses' feet rung sharply on the rocky soil to be echoed back with remarkable distinctness. Tall cliffs arose on each side, and through the pass ran a small stream.

Pretty soon they reached where the supply of water came tumbling down the eastern cliff, and there the opposite wall of rock suddenly receded, leaving a chasm at its base.

Between this chasm and the eastern cliff ran a shelf of rock twenty feet wide and curving steadily, and along this shelf was the road of the travelers.

Perhaps it would have done no good, but it was a moment in the life of Paul Wilbur when alertness was imperatively necessary. Death hovered in his path, but he knew not of it. His mind was on the old Ohio home, and he was forgetful of all else.

At a bend in the rude road two men lay behind a boulder, smoking short black pipes. They wore the red shirts and usual costume of miners, but little more than this could be told. Over their heads were curious masks, which concealed even the color of their hair.

One of the two lay flat on his back, the other was steadily watching the southern trail.

"Any sign yet?" asked the former, lazily.

"Nary sign," was the curt answer.

"They are uncommon slow."

"Look-a-hyar," said the other, suddenly; "I'm afeerd ther varmints hev slipped through our fingers. It's high time they was hyar ef they are comin'. Kin old Thayer hev fooled us!"

"Lord love ye, no. Et don't stand ter reason. Didn't he give us a retaining fee, as he called et?"

The second man did not answer, for, just at that moment, around the bend in the shelf road came Paul Wilbur and Mr. Barr. Then the men in ambush dropped their pipes and raised their rifles instead.

"You take ther old one, an' I'll spot Mister Wilbur, plum' center," said the first ambusher.

"All right."

Crouching side by side, concealed by the boulder, the villains took careful aim, each covering a man, and then at a given signal their weapons rung out sharply, and two bits of lead sped on their way.

It was a terrible interruption, and dropping their rifles the murderers ran forward with their revolvers ready, though they had no doubt of their aim in the first case.

What they saw was not expected. Both Barr and Wilbur gave evidence of being hit, but before they could fall the horse of the former leaped sideways like a flash, collided sharply with the second animal, and then both with their riders disappeared over the ledge.

The surprised assassins hastened forward and looked down the abyss. Men and beasts had disappeared in a growth of pines and ragged rocks far below, but it was as satisfactory as though they lay dead on the shelf above.

"They've saved ther undertaker all expense," said one of the masked men, with a laugh.

"Yes, but how are we ter get down?"

"What in thunder do we want ter go down fur?"

"Mebbe somebody'll find ther bodies, ef we leave them thar."

"Don't you worry about that. I've been in

ther Gunnison three year, an' them two critters are ther first I ever knowed ter go down in Barrel Chasm. Nobody'll find ther bodies—don't you worry."

"Of course they are dead," said the other man hesitatingly.

"Wal, I reckon they be. They couldn't live through that tumble ef they was made o' cl'ar iron. Why, ther rocks an' bushes ain't left sea'cely a piece on 'em."

"That's so; an' what proof be we ter offer ter old Thayer that they are dead?"

"Proof? Ain't our word enough?"

"It orter be, considerin' how we kin lie; but he may kick ag'in' payin' without proof."

"He dassent. No, sirree, he will come down with ther dust or git s'arved as we s'arved them."

He pointed down the chasm.

It had been an abrupt ending to Randolph Barr's mission, and a terrible ending to two human lives; but the wretches who had so coolly sped the fatal bullets cared nothing for that.

To them, Barrel Chasm seemed just the proper grave for men who had been in somebody's way.

CHAPTER II.

THE PILGRIM AT MAGOFFIN'S.

"TUMBLE out an' stretch yerself; hyar we be at Buzzard Bar!"

Long Tom Barney opened the door of the stage with a jerk, and shouted the foregoing words in a way which seemed unnecessarily loud, and then there was a stir from within as of some animal moving in his cage.

And the crowd of men who had surged forth from Jack Magoffin's "hotel" as the stage neared the door—brawny, red-shirted miners were they—looked in eager expectancy to see what Tom Barney had that day brought from Crested Butte.

All the way along the road Long Tom had been growling because he had but one passenger; but he had a spice of humor in his nature, and from the polite way in which he opened the stage door, the citizens of the Bar were expecting to see either a female beauty or a broadcloth magnate from Denver.

The solitary passenger alighted and stood before them, but the sight was not one to dazzle their eyes.

Since the discovery of gold west of Marshall Pass, the flood-tide of emigration had sent into Gunnison county a representative of almost every nationality and class of human beings under the sun; but never had so poor a specimen come to Buzzard Bar, in the opinion of the old inhabitants, as this last deposit.

He was young for an emigrant, for his years were less than eighteen in number, and about as "green" in appearance as any young man Colorado had ever received from other climes.

In stature he was almost a man, and plenty of muscle lurked along his arms and shoulders, but he had not yet had time to expand, and was not of faultless shape.

The same fault might have been found with his clothes. They were, without exception, too small for him. His pants reached only half-way below his knees, the sleeves of his coat were equally short, and his hat lacked the manly proportions of the typical Colorado article.

And as this awkward, overgrown young fellow stood awkwardly in front of the door, a valise in one hand and an umbrella in the other, the spectators failed to see that he had an intelligent face and sharp eyes—they saw him only as he was, a boy and a tenderfoot, and a broad smile ran around the circle.

Then one of their number, a stout young fellow a little older than the new-comer, ran out to meet him.

"I'm the porter," he said, briskly. "Let me take your grip-sack, mister."

The tenderfoot looked at him closely.

"I was brung up tew be my own servant," he modestly said, "an' I guess I won't trouble you."

"But they all do it," persisted the other. "I'm the porter, you see, an' I kerry their baggage an' they give me a leetle suthin' fur my trouble."

"Wal, if I don't trouble you, I won't owe you nothin', so I guess I'll dew my own work."

The tenderfoot pushed past the joker and mounted the steps of Jack Magoffin's hotel. Some further remarks were made by the men on the steps, but he disregarded them and entered.

"Oh! whar in thunder did you get it, Tom Barney?" demanded the young fellow who had

claimed to be the "porter," and he seemed in some way to be a good deal amused.

"Now you shut up, Dave French. I've sounded that youngster on ther way over, an' I reckon he deserves good usage. He's an orphan, he says, an' anxious to get ahead in ther world—ready to work an' all that sort o' thing. He is green an' awk'ard, but, I say, give him a show."

Long Tom Barney spoke with unusual emphasis. He was a rough-and-ready fellow himself, and seldom missed a chance for fun, but he had been thinking all the way over that his inexperienced passenger would stand a poor chance with the rough characters at Buzzard Bar, and he felt rather sorry for him.

Just then, however, there was no discussion, for Barney drove away to stable his horses, and the crowd rolled back inside, partly because it was their usual quarters, and partly because they wanted to see the tenderfoot.

The latter stood at the bar talking with Jack Magoffin, and his ill-shaped form and worse-shaped clothes were only less conspicuous than his "grip-sack."

Jack was treating him politely, having first made sure that there was money at hand to pay all bills, for he was not particular what kind of lodgers he housed, so long as the money was sure.

"Set right down at a table," Jack was saying, "an' you shall hav your supper in a shake. This hyar edifice ain't a New York hotel, an' ther dinin'-room are right hyar. Squat an' you kin hav all you want ter eat. What did you say your name was?"

"Joshua Pepper, sir," was the meek reply.

"We don't geep a register, but you kin stand et. I reckon. Set down!"

The boy had been looking at the crowd who had filed in, and his face bore an uncertain, half-troubled look. Something about the rough fellows did not please him, but he finally sat down at a table, depositing his baggage between his feet.

Once more the crowd smiled. They were some of the roughest men in Buzzard Bar—Sam Crowell, Pistol Pete, Fighting Sir, Sile Barker and others; among whom Dave French, the young fellow who had first accosted the tenderfoot, was far from being the least.

Dave had been a guardian of sheep, near Hugo, in the days before Gunnison county had made itself known, but he had little in his nature that was lamb-like.

A hard boy was Dave, a good revolver shot and handy with his fists, and when he took a spite against one of his years he was pretty sure to go through victoriously; and with him victory meant a display of all his lawless ways.

He watched the Boy Tenderfoot, as the latter fell to eating, with an expression of dubious meaning on his face. He had been thwarted at the start in his attempt to raise a laugh at Joshua's expense, and now he was planning fresh mischief.

It would have been an easy matter to hurl some sort of a missile at the young pilgrim or his supper, but "Frenchy," as Dave was familiarly called, had one very good reason for not proceeding to extreme measures.

Long Tom Barney, the stage driver, had entered the room, swallowed a mixture of "something hot" and taken a seat near at hand, and Dave knew that he would not stand idle if the case went beyond a certain point.

Against the ex-cowboy he had an old grudge, and though he was not one to lift his hand against a man of half his size without provocation, he would be only too willing to bring Dave to grief.

The latter looked up as Sile Barber crossed the room and sat down beside him.

"I say, can't we hav some fun out o' this chicken?" Sile asked.

"I don't see nothin' to prevent. Go right in."

"Don't you want ther job?"

Dave hesitated for a moment.

"Not while Long Tom is around," he finally admitted.

Sile did not need any explanation. He knew Long Tom Barney himself, and as he looked across the room at the six-footer, it struck him he might have an object in hanging around Magoffin's that night—for Barney had a young wife at the other end of the Bar, and he usually headed for home as soon as he struck the camp.

"You're right, Frenchy," he said, in a subdued voice. "Let's lay low an' give nary a whisper, an' party soon Tom will go home. Then, we'll hav some fun with the tenderfoot."

"He's a harsome bird, ain't he?"

"Harsome ain't no name fur it. He's ther

pootiest pilgrim in ther Gunnison. Look at his ha'r! Reminds me o' ther oxen my dad used ter drive in York State. We called one on 'em Buck, an' t'other Brindle."

"Brindle? That'd be a mighty good name fur this chap. What did he say his name was? Josh Pepper, or suthin' o' ther kind. Brindle Josh would jest fit him an' kiver that ha'r o' his as a rainbow covers a hog's back."

Frenchy spoke viciously, for he had already taken a causeless dislike to the boy pilgrim; and as Sile added his mite to the contribution they managed to say some rather keen things about Joshua Pepper.

The latter ate his supper in silence, but he glanced about the room now and then, first at its equipments and then at the men in the red shirts, and in every way he betrayed the fact that he was a "stranger in a strange land."

Having finished his supper, he retained his seat; but from his frequent glances toward Jack Magoffin, who was expounding Eastern news to a prospector fresh from the Elk Mountains, it would seem that Joshua wished to catch the landlord's attention, but was too bashful to press forward.

Meanwhile, Long Tom Barney, failing to see signs of trouble in the camp, gave way to his desire to roast his feet over his own stove, arose, stretched himself, and went out of the door.

Frenchy and Sile exchanged glances. Their time had come, and, with their plans all arranged, further delay was unnecessary.

Sile arose, stretched himself as carelessly as Barney had done, and then walked forward and took a seat opposite the young pilgrim.

CHAPTER III.

THE PIPE OF PEACE—AND WAR.

BUZZARD BAR was a young town at the time of which we write, and it will be many years yet before it can boast of maturity. Its history was similar to that of the majority of the towns in the Gunnison. Crested Butte was (and is) the metropolis of the county, being the first place settled after the miners pushed through Marshall Pass and found gold beyond; and when the railroad crawled through the dizzy pass, Crested Butte became the western terminus and the mother town of all the brood beyond.

Irwin, Ruby, Gothic, Pittsburg, Buzzard Bar and other towns sprung up one after another, and the fame of "the Gunnison" spread even beyond the limits of Colorado.

The Bar was usually a quiet place. It had never had a plague of road-agents, and there was little promiscuous shooting done, except when the citizens sampled too much whisky and went on a blind trail; but there were lawless characters there, the volcano was liable to burst at any time, and, it may be mentioned parenthetically, Dave French was a young man not very strongly trusted by those who believed in law and order.

With this digression, let us resume our story proper.

Sile Barker sat down opposite the boy pilgrim and nodded in what he meant to be a fascinating way.

"Wal, young feller," he said, "how does things strike you? Hope ther Bar pans out ekul ter your expectations."

"I can't tell yit," answered the tenderfoot, more promptly than might have been expected. "My dad used tew say that one swarler didn't make a summer, an' I can't tell all about this taown in ten minutes."

"O'course not, o' course not," said Sile briskly. "You will need ter look around ter-morrer. Goin' ter locate hyar?"

"Maybe. I can't tell—" "Ef you want ter buy shares in ther best mine in ther Gunnison, I'm your man. I'll sell cheap—say at—"

Joshua shook his head.

"I hain't got any money," he said. "I come here tew make money, instead o' spendin' it."

"Want a job?"

"Yes, that's what I come for, an' I must have one tareal quick, tew. Dad give me enough money tew get tew Denver, an' then I earned enough tew come here, but it's pritty nigh gone now."

The boy heaved a sigh. He was hundreds of miles from home, among strangers and nearly penniless, and he had been in Colorado long enough to know that money is there, as everywhere else, a hard thing to find and secure.

At this point, Sile fairly boiled over with seeming good will and interest. He leaned forward over the table, punctuated his remarks with his finger, which was waved near Joshua's face, and then poured upon him a flood of what

seemed to be good advice and practical information.

At times, however, the fellow's eyes wavered and seemed taking in something beyond their table, but, unconscious of premeditated mischief, the tenderfoot listened to his new acquaintances.

Mischief, however, was brewing, and Dave French was at the bottom of it all. He had slowly made his way around behind Joshua's chair, and with a skill worthy of a better cause had succeeded in tying a string to the precious valise resting between the tenderfoot's feet.

At last the trap was ready for the springing, and while Josh was listening with wide-open mouth and eyes, he was suddenly amazed to have his valise glide from beneath his feet as though gifted with life.

At the same moment Sile Barker abruptly arose, knocking over the table and nearly upsetting the young pilgrim, while the unremoved dishes went clattering to the floor.

Josh only saved himself from falling by dropping on all fours, but in a moment he was on his feet.

"Thunderation! was et an' arthquake?" Sile Barker demanded, in assumed alarm.

Joshua scarcely heard him. He saw the overturned table and the scattered dishes, but his valise was nowhere to be seen. He looked all over the room, and then a scared look settled on his face.

The miners kept their seats at the other tables, the majority smiling, and all smoking unconcernedly. Among the rest was Dave French, who looked the picture of innocence.

"Where's my valise?" the tenderfoot asked, his voice trembling a little.

"Yer what?" asked Sile. "Oh, I savvy. You mean yer grip-sack. Wa-al, I dunno—ain't it fell inter one o' yer butes?"

"I reckon et are gone ahind ther bar fur a drink," said Dave French, unable to remain silent.

"Have yeou seen it?" the tenderfoot asked.

"No. I've resigned my orfice as porter," the ex-cowboy nonchalantly said.

Joshua allowed his gaze to wander from Dave to Sile, and then over to the other men. He looked alarmed, as well he might, for in the valise were all of the valuables he had in the world, and to lose even that much was a great calamity.

He was well aware that he was the victim of a trick, for he had been acquainted with the valise for fifteen years, and knew it was not possessed of pedestrian accomplishments in itself, but he did not know just where to place the blame.

Some one, either for mischief or robbery, had made way with his baggage—who was it?

Joshua was sharp enough to see a way of learning. He noticed that one of the miners sitting near him neither smiled nor looked in the least degree amused. On the contrary, his expression satisfied Josh that he did not approve of the trick.

"Sir," said the boy, bashfully, "will yeou tell me where that valise is?"

"Wal, ther last I see'd on't twar a shootin' through that thar winder," was the ready reply. "Es fur how it happened ter go, Frenchy ought ter be able ter tell you best. He chucked et out!"

Joshua gave one reproachful glance at Dave French, alias Frenchy, and then darted through the door in search of the valise.

Dave and his partner in mischief, Sile Barker, burst into a loud laugh, and then the former sprung forward to bar the outer door; but Jack Magoffin carelessly reached under his bar, brought out a polished six-shooter and covered the ex-cowboy.

"Hold up thar!" he said, quietly. "Look this way, Frenchy."

The young ruffian turned and saw the revolver covering his head.

"I don't mind a leetle fun at ther funeral, boyee," said Magoffin, cheerfully: "but that thar door never is locked until midnight. Let it alone!"

Frenchy had a due regard for Magoffin's skill with his Smith & Wesson, and he turned and went sulkily back to his seat, but brightened up as the tenderfoot re-entered, valise in hand.

He had found his property outside in good condition, but his look was not that of a happy person.

"I'm afeerd I was a leetle rough," said Frenchy, in a pacific tone. "Ef so, I'm sorry an' it sha'n't happen ag'in. Set down, Josh, set down."

There was only one vacant seat, and that was at the table opposite French; but the tender-

foot, after a glance about the room, slid into the chair as though afraid it would arise and sail away with him for an unwilling passenger.

He looked so green and acted so awkwardly that some of the men pitied him, but this class kept silent because tenderfeet were common in the Gunnison, all that remained had to endure a species of hazing, like a student at college, and the sooner poor Josh took his various degrees, the sooner he would be out of trouble.

Perhaps none of these specious reasoners, however, ever found themselves a thousand miles from every acquaintance, at the age of seventeen, like this overgrown boy with the valise.

Dave French smiled in a self-satisfied way.

"I'm a great hand fur tricks," he resumed, "an' I sometimes carry them too fur, which makes me feel bad arterwards; but ter show you that I don't hold any spite, allow me ter offer you a few drags from this hyer pipe o' mine."

With these words he held toward the young pilgrim the article he called a pipe. Probably it was one; it certainly had been in its youth, though only of common clay; but long and frequent use, together with cruel neglect, had made it so bad and, withal, so filthy, that only a blind man would dare put it in his mouth.

Joshua gazed at this cremator of the weed, but his face did not brighten, nor did he show any enthusiasm about accepting it.

"Take it!" said French, blandly; "I have another. Take it an' smoke hearty."

"I'm much oblieged," said the tenderfoot, hastily, "but I don't smoke."

"Then it is time ter larn. You'll never see another pipe like this. Take it!"

Dave's voice was growing a trifle peremptory, but still the pipe remained in his hand.

"If you've got a saw-mill handy, yeou had better put it under the wheel an' give it a good souisin'," suggested Joshua.

"The pipe is all right," said Dave, striking his fist on the table. "Do you mean ter insult me?"

"Not a tall, but I don't mean tew smoke, nuther. Dad always said that ev'ry whiff from ther bowl was a penny from the bank, an'—"

"Durn your dad!" shouted Dave, with assumed anger. "Et's you an' me that hes ther floor hyar, an' thar pipe is between us. I say you are goin' ter smoke et, an', by thunder, you shall!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST.

The little unpleasantness had arrived at a crisis. The ex-cowboy had played long enough with his chosen victim in a cat-and-mouse fashion, and now he intended to humiliate him before the spectators and raise a laugh—at the tenderfoot's expense.

Unluckily for poor Joshua, Dave was not a man who mixed honey with his sting. He was a rough fellow who united a man's strength and skill with his nineteen years, and conscious superiority made him a bully.

He was sure that he could handle the tenderfoot with one hand, if it came to that, and he was not one to show mercy.

Joshua, however, exhibited sudden and unexpected resolution in the face of the last assertion.

"I'll be gosh-darned if I dew!" he said, drawing back from the proffered pipe. "Dad always said a new bridge was none tew good fur him tew cross, an' when I smoke, it won't be with a pipe so ternal black as that air thing!"

The red-shirted miners looked up with fresh interest. Not for one moment had they expected to see the young stranger exhibit courage, but his foot had come down emphatically, and he won friends by the speech, though some regretted it because Dave French was then sure to push him to the wall.

One moment the latter was rendered speechless by the rank rebellion, and then a red flush deepened the color of his face.

"Why, you long-legged, slab-sided, lantern-jawed son of a coyote!" he howled, in a voice intended to terrify the object of his wrath, "what do you mean? Do you know who I be? Do yer know I am boss in Buzzard Bar? Look hyar, now, let me give ye a bit o' advice. You're a stranger hyar, an' sech hev ter be unshamed an' ter obey ther powers that be. Now, I ain't a hard man, but I'm sot in my way. I say you muft smoke that pipe, an' ef you don't do it, I'll mop up ther whole floor with ye!"

And once more Dave's fist made the table tremble.

"Wal, I dunno about that," Joshua returned,

with his former promptness. "Dad used tew say that this was a free country all the way from Maine tew California, an' while it is so, I'm bound tew be my own boss."

Over on the floor went Dave's chair as he bounded up, and then he strode around the table and laid one big, red hand on the tenderfoot's shoulder.

"Shut your teeth on that pipe an' smoke," he grimly said, "or by ther eternal I'll drive your ivories down your throat!"

He held one fist in front of Joshua's nose to emphasize his remark, and the atmosphere began to grow blue around the pair.

Several of the miners arose, the majority of them still in harmony with Dave, and the young pilgrim was at last driven to the wall.

He must fight or show his back.

Evidently he was himself aware of this fact, for he wriggled out of his chair and to his feet with an agility which surprised all.

"By gosh!" he forcibly said, "you are pushin' this matter most tew fur. If yeou want tu smoke yer old pipe, dew so; but I'll be darned ef I will!"

And he stood remarkably straight and looked defiance at the young bully.

The latter walked around the vacant chair and faced his victim with his fists doubled and an ugly look on his coarse features.

"Brindle Josh," he said, deliberately, "you hev insulted a man that never stands sass or takes water. You hev hurt my feelings, an' ther only way o' apology is ter fight. Knuckle ag'in' knuckle, an' muscle ag'in' muscle, shall settle it."

"Come ahead, then, yeou darned fool!" cried Josh, belligerently. "I ain't a fightin' man, but I had an uncle who did fight three year in the big war, an' I guess the blood ain't all run out yet!"

The die was cast; the collision must come; but for a moment Dave hesitated. Well aware that he had a fine form, he wished the miners of maturer years to look at him well—against some of them he had grudges he meant to pay off some time; and this was a chance to make an impression.

There was a vast contrast in the appearance of the two prospective pugilists.

Dave, although but nineteen years of age and smooth of face, had the form of a man—the compact, sinewy form resulting from his wild, outdoor life, and, withal, he looked like a veritable prize fighter as he tore the mask to demolish the tenderfoot.

The latter was nearly two years his junior and, though fully as tall, possessed a form in no degree comparable with his opponent's. At first sight an observer would have doubted whether his various limbs were really jointed to his body, so loosely did they seem to hang; but a closer survey revealed the fact that a little of this awkwardness was due to his ill-fitting garments, while a promising breadth of shoulder and chest gradually made itself visible.

He stood with his hands raised for a guard, but even there he was open to criticism; no professional would have commended the position.

His uncouthness impressed even Dave French, and while a smile crossed his face, he suddenly thrust out his thumb and finger and tried to catch Joshua's nose; a breach of politeness which was frustrated by a brush of the tenderfoot's broad hand.

That, however, served as a good excuse for Dave to open hostilities, and his ponderous left fist suddenly shot forward, straight toward Joshua's face—and spent its force on the empty air.

By some cunning move—no; it must have been mere chance—he had passed the fist over his shoulder and saved his face.

The failure acted on Dave like a spur, and with an angry exclamation he pressed forward, striking out as rapidly as possible.

According to his own estimate, "Brindle Josh" ought by that time to have been knocked out of time, but, very much to the surprise of every one, he had passed aside or dodged all of these sledge-hammer blows.

The veterans of the pick began to look at him with fresh interest. He was showing a skill not to be expected in any boy of his age, while for such a simple looking youth, it was little less than marvelous.

Some of the men enjoyed Dave's want of success and began to audibly taunt him, and their words stung the ex-cowboy to a fury.

He pressed forward so rapidly that Joshua was steadily driven back, but every blow spent its force on the air or was neatly parried, and Dave was fast losing what science he had ever possessed.

Thus far in the battle the tenderfoot had not lost his sleepy look, but, anon, a brighter light began to creep into his dull blue eyes.

"If you don't go away, there will be trouble here," he warningly said.

"Trouble? Why, you red-headed gorilla, I'll knock you all ter pieces," foamed Dave.

The light in the tenderfoot's eyes grew still brighter, and he watched his assailant's movements more closely; then with a quick movement he drove his heavy fist through Dave's guard and encountered something solid behind.

One moment the ex-cowboy was pounding the air in his strength and pride, the next he was on the floor, having knocked over a chair in his descent, and sprawling about in a way most humiliating to one whose pride was in his strength.

A series of shouts arose from the miners, all taunting of word and inflection, even the majority of his friends laughing at his downfall.

He came up quickly, his face red from wrath, but redder still on one cheek, where showed the imprint of the blow which had prostrated him, and like a wild buffalo he rushed at Joshua.

The latter, however, was done playing. His fist met Dave half-way, and once more there was a heavy fall.

"Did you hear anything drop?"

"Where was Frenchy when ther light went out?"

"Toe ther mark, Frenchy; what yer skeered of?"

"Ten ter one on ther tenderfoot!"

These and o her shouts greeted the ears of the young man from Hugo as he arose, but though furious with rage he was not a fool. He had seen enough of the tenderfoot to be sure that he could not whip him *a la Heenan*, and he resolved to try another method.

He darted forward, and when Joshua struck managed to dodge the blow and catch him about the waist. Here, at least, his strength would give him speedy victory—unless Dave argued incorrectly.

Once more, however, the pilgrim found himself at home. He dropped his hands and caught his oppo ent, and though the latter had secured so advantageous a hold, he failed to secure a fall.

Back and forth over the floor they struggled, and as the interest of the spectators increased, they cheered until the noise was almost deafening; while Jack Magofflin, forgetful of trade and order, mounted the bar, and looking over the heads of the crowd, clapped his hands vigorously.

An idea had entered the tenderfoot's mind, but Dave French was no mean adversary, and he was some time in executing it.

First of all, it was necessary to break his hold, and before this could be effected the two had gone over nearly the whole space of the floor, greatly to the peril of tables and chairs, and the cheering crowd was kept on the move to avoid them.

At last, however, they fell over a chair, and Dave's tenacious hold was broken, and when they arose it was to secure one mutually fair, and to renew the struggle as briskly as before.

Joshua, however, had not forgotten his former idea, and he soon saw a chance to execute it.

Suddenly putting out all his strength, he lifted the ex-cowboy bodily, raised him on high, and then, with a tremendous effort, dashed him through the very window out of which Dave had a little before thrown the inoffensive valise.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST STEP.

DAVE FRENCH had come to grief in a manner at once novel and very appropriate, but he had no sooner disappeared through the window than the shouts of the miners ceased.

The ex-cowboy's friends were angry at the way he had been ejected, while those who cared nothing for him grew grave at the thought of what they believed would be the next step in his warfare.

Sile Barker crossed the room and looked at Joshua with a threatening scowl.

"You think yer did a mighty smart thing then, don't yer?" he demanded. "I've got a good mind ter smash yer red head fur ye!"

"That's jest what he tried tew dew," returned the tenderfoot, promptly. "Yeou seen haow it worked, didn't yeou?"

"None o' your back-talk, you corkscrew-legged cockroach!" roared the man, shaking his fist in Joshua's face. "One more word o' impudence an' I'll smash you all in pieces!"

"I wouldn't!" said a quiet voice at his elbow. Barker wheeled suddenly. Beside him stood a small, rather insignificant-looking man of mid-

dle age—the kind of a man nine persons out of ten would set down to be as harmless as a coyote. Barker, however, knew him better than that. He was called Pistol Pete, and, besides being the best revolver shot at the Bar, was without mercy when once aroused out of his usual quietness.

Sile stared at him in silence.

"This matter has gone far enough," said Pistol Pete, calmly. "Dave French has been beaten at his own game, and that settles the matter. You won't touch the tenderfoot, and if Frenchy comes in, as I expect he will, with his revolver drawn, he must drop it."

Every word was as quiet as though the talk concerned only a breakfast; but Sile knew the man meant what he said, and he, for one, did not care to anger him.

Just then Dave sprung through the door, his revolver out as Pete had prophesied, and his flaming eyes seeking the cause of his misfortune.

Instead, he saw Pistol Pete.

"Put down the shooter," said the latter, quietly. "If you try to sling lead at the boy I shall take a hand in the game, and you know I carry a thirty-two caliber."

Dave's hand dropped like a lump of lead. Of all the men in the Gunnison, he feared Pistol Pete most. It was the first time they had ever been against each other, for Pete was no angel, but his words fell like a dash of cold water on the young bully.

One moment his face worked strangely and his color changed from red to white, for he was terribly angry, but he had considerable self-control when he saw fit to use it, and he finally ended by bursting into a laugh.

"Have your own way, Pete," he said, with pretended carelessness, "but it strikes me that if you interfere ter protect your friends you arter also keep them from chuckin' other folks out o' ther winder."

"Your argument ain't worth answering," said Pete, as he turned away. "Still, jedging from what I've seen o' the tenderfoot, I advise you to let him alone."

Peace was restored on the surface. Joshua quietly resumed his seat, and the miners did the same. This time Dave and Sile went to the further side of the room, and seemed to have abandoned all thoughts of further warfare; but Josh noticed that they talked earnestly and frequently glanced his way.

Now that the excitement was over, the young stranger began to feel down-hearted and homesick. He was no world-wise person in disguise; he was merely a country boy far from home, and at last he was beginning to realize that rough places lie in the path of the youth who tries to climb the ladder of life.

When at home Joshua had known a Frenchman who had once been a boxing-master in New York city, and who was besides a fine shot and swordsman, and from him he had learned the art of self-defense.

It was the knowledge thus acquired which had enabled him to defeat Dave French, but his courage wavered a good deal now that the excitement was over.

He felt the need of some good friend, or lacking that, of well-meant advice, but he knew not who to ask. Pistol Pete had begun a game of poker with some of the other miners, and Joshua instinctively felt that he was not a desirable friend.

Finally, anxious to be out of the room, he hesitatingly approached Jack Magoffin and asked to be shown to his sleeping apartment.

Magoffin seemed to have been struck by a heavy frost of some stamp, for he no longer looked with friendly eyes on his guest. Without a word he took a light, conducted the tenderfoot up a rude stairway to a still ruder room, pointed to a bed which surpassed everything else in rudeness, placed the light on the stool, which was the only article of furniture, and returned to his bar.

Joshua Pepper was alone, and a more homesick boy was not to be found anywhere. He was no coward, as he had that evening proved, but he was away from home for the first time in his life, and he had just begun to realize that breakers lie thickly along the river of life.

The doubts, fears and troubles of the young "pilgrim" during that night may be imagined. Suffice it to say, he had no further adventure, and morning found him alive and well, even as the sight of daylight served to nearly banish his homesickness.

Just at that time he was the only lodger in the hotel, and when he went down to the bar-room he found the place without a single occupant excepting Magoffin, who greeted him with a nod of unexpected graciousness.

The burly landlord, however, had taken a fancy to him because of the courage he had shown the previous evening, and he showed it in more than one way before the interview was over.

"You did amazin' wal," he said, as Joshua ate his breakfast. "I really didn't think that war another youngster in ther Gunnison that could handle Dave French. Yas, you did wal, but you've got ter keep your eyes open arter this. Frenchy es as venomous as a rattlesnake, an' you kin jist bet that he'll try ter get squar' with yer in some way."

"He forced the quarrel on me," said Joshua.

"That don't make any difference; you tuk his pride 'way down, an' he's goin' ter hav revenge ef he can git it. What be you goin' ter do?"

The sudden change of subject, and the importance of the question, made Joshua start, but he answered bravely:

"Most anything I can git a chance at," he said.

"I know a man that wants a boy," said Magoffin, with an earnest air.

Joshua laid down his knife.

"I wish he'd take me," he said.

"Mebbe he will. He told me t'other day that ef any likely young tenderfoot came along, ter send him around ter ther house."

"Where is it?" Joshua eagerly asked.

"I'll show you arter breakfast. His name is Jared Thayer. Ef you kin get inter his good graces, you are made, for sure. He's ther head pardner o' ther firm o' Thayer & Foster, ther same that owns ther Tiger Mine; and he has got piles o' dust. Him and Foster tuk ther mine when it war cl'ar played out, an' they've made things hum ever since. Ef he cottons to yer, ye may think yerself ther luckiest galoot in Colorado."

Joshua was excited over the prospect, and when, after breakfast, Magoffin put his place in charge of his assistant and walked over to Thayer's with the tenderfoot, the latter was filled with the wildest hopes.

If he had known Jack Magoffin better, he would have scarcely felt so much pleased, for it was a well known fact at the Bar that the landlord never took any step not calculated to result to his personal advantage.

They reached the residence of Mr. Thayer—a very large, pretentious building for Buzzard Bar—and Magoffin played a tattoo on the door which speedily brought into view a young lady of rather prepossessing appearance.

Joshua was astonished, and while he stared at the girl, she reciprocated with equal interest. She was probably of just about his own age, but she was far more mature of appearance and would have passed for twenty.

"Mandy, is yer old man in?" Magoffin briskly asked, with a wave of his hand.

"Rather," she admitted. "Trot up and see him if you want to."

She spoke languidly and stepped aside for them to pass, and, somehow, Joshua felt a good deal impressed by her appearance. She was gayly, if not tastefully dressed, and it was no small matter to be the daughter of the richest man of the Bar.

They entered another room and stood in the presence of Mr. Jared Thayer. During the interview which followed, Joshua was too excited to scan him critically, but he saw a large, fleshy man, with a smooth-shaven, benevolent-looking face, and had he been announced as a minister, the boy would not have doubted it.

Mr. Thayer spoke in a bland, smooth tone, and in the course of half an hour he had asked the applicant a great number of questions—questions which were very readily answered as time wore on and Thayer did not criticise anything his caller said.

At last he leaned back in his chair.

"I think you and I will do," he said, blandly. "I want a young man for general work of a light nature about my office, at the mine and in the house. Your education makes you especially desirable, and you can enter upon your duties as soon as you see fit. Your terms are reasonable and the pay may be increased, while, in all cases, it will be promptly given you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER.

A WEEK passed quietly away, so far as the experience of Joshua Pepper was concerned. All the while he had been engaged on his duties for Mr. Thayer, or, as it seemed, since he was so much in the office and about the mine, for Thayer and Foster.

The junior member of the firm was a man of

less polish than his partner, but he was a practical miner and fully able to look out for the dollars and cents.

Joshua, without questioning, had received a good deal of information about matters around Buzzard Bar, and, among other things about the Tiger Mine. It had never been a prosperous concern until the present owners took it in hand. Before, it had passed through the ownership of a dozen parties, and, once, it had been in the hands of an Eastern man; but he came to the Bar and sold to Thayer & Foster, who soon made the place pay.

All this news Joshua heard with indifference at the time, but it was destined to come back to him more forcibly at a later day.

The personal appearance of the tenderfoot had improved somewhat. His ill-fitting garments had been thrown away and replaced by a mining-suit, and as he walked the streets in the glory of his red shirt and big hat, he looked better and felt more at home than he had done during his first night at the Bar.

Since that night he had never spoken to Dave French.

Twice he had seen him pass the office of Thayer & Foster, but during the day the young bully was employed at another mine and Joshua did not go out in the evening.

Consequently, the ex-cowboy had not yet had a chance to manifest any spite he might have.

Matters were going very smoothly with Joshua. Both partners used him well, and Thayer was almost fatherly in his bland kindness.

Amanda also figured somewhat in the youth's experience.

She was a young lady of a turn of mind seldom seen in the Gunnison, for, though somewhat given to crudities of speech, she was as languid and, in her own estimation, as refined as an Eastern belle.

Joshua decided, after a day or two, that she "meant well but wasn't very smart"—and a good many people would have agreed with him.

Toward her father's "clerk," as Thayer chose to call him, she was always polite, in her indolent way, and had never shown any signs that she observed his want of experience in Western ways; but she bestowed few unnecessary words upon him, and he was not inclined to seek for them.

He slept in the senior partner's house, which, as has before been said, was a pretentious structure for Buzzard Bar, but at the same time it lacked all that comes under the name elegant.

Joshua had the upper floor to himself, so far as human occupancy was concerned. That part lacked the first steps toward being finished, but Josh had slept in rooms a good deal like it in the East, and did not mind his surroundings as long as the bed was good and comfortable.

At one end of the long, garret-like place was his bed; and this, with a single chair, comprised the furniture, though he still clung to his valise and often looked at it affectionately as it hung on a peg.

One night, after climbing up to his room, the youth sat down on the floor and, using the chair for a table, wrote a letter to the "old folks at home."

By the time it was finished he was almost asleep, and quickly getting into bed he soon lost consciousness, and slept as only young people can.

What it was that awakened him he never knew—it certainly was not any noise—but at last his eyes opened, and he was as wide awake as though it had been midday.

Still, without stirring, he noted the fact that it was still dark, and he was about to turn himself in bed when an unusual sound from a point only a few feet distant attracted his attention and kept him motionless.

The sound was repeated—something which sounded like a cautious footstep—but as Joshua had never known any person except himself to be in the room, he listened with a good deal of interest.

Again the sound.

Joshua lifted his head and tried to see through the darkness, but the attempt was a failure. Then, once more, he heard the sound, this time quite near the bed, and, beyond a doubt, a foot fall.

The discovery did not alarm him, for he had no doubt as to the identity of the prowler.

"Is that you, Mr. Thayer?" he asked.

The cautious movements immediately ceased, but, to Joshua's surprise, no answer was returned.

He repeated the question, and then sat upright, peering into the darkness, and wonder-

ing why no notice was taken of what he had said.

The matter was soon settled. Even while Joshua was looking to the left, a strong hand encircled his neck, and something cold and hard was pressed against his right temple.

"Silence!" hissed a voice in his ear. "One word and you die!"

It was a useless command, for the youth could not have spoken if he would, but it served to keep him from making a struggle. Should the hold on his neck be continued, he would soon be brought to the point of strangulation, but he was shrewd enough to see that the most imminent danger was from the revolver, and he concluded to make complete obedience.

Therefore, he kept his place as though turned to a statue.

"I am going to give you a chance to breathe," continued his assailant: "but you will remember that my revolver is at your head, and if you utter a cry or try to escape, out go your brains."

He dropped his hand from Joshua's throat, but only to transfar his grasp to his arm.

"Who in thunder are you?" he then demanded.

"I guess it's my place ter ask that question," said the youth. "I belong here an' yeou don't, Yeou ain't Mr. Thayer nor 'Mandy—who be yeou?"

"Since you are so anxious, I am a cutthroat of the first water. I have killed over forty men by daylight and twenty-seven at night. That brings us down to my own question. Who are you?"

"Wal, so fur as name goes, I'm Joshua Pepper, son o' Job Pepper, o' York State," said the tenderfoot, calmly.

"I never heard of you before. Do you belong in this house?"

"I guess I do, mister. I'm bookkeeper fur Thayer & Foster."

"Aha! a new steer in the pasture. Well, this rather surprises me. I did not expect to meet you. What are you, anyhow—boy or man?"

"A man, an' I weight two hundred—no, I'll be darned if I dew. Dad always said truth was a jewel beyond price. I'm seventeen year old, most eighteen. But, see here, mister, what be yeou doin' in this haouse? Yeou don't belong here."

"I am happy to say that I do not, but you will readily perceive that I am here just the same. To further impress the fact on your mind, I shall have to bind you, hand and foot, an' insert a gag in your mouth."

"Thunderation!" said Joshua, really alarmed. "What is that for? What have I did—"

"Nothing, as yet, and I don't intend that you shall. An ounce of prevention, and so forth. Hold out your hand, young man!"

Joshua was thinking rapidly and trying to discover a way out of this unexpected trouble. He had not the slightest idea who this stranger was, but it was evident he was in the house with hostile intentions. At the least, he must intend robbery; it might be he harbored thoughts of murder.

By nature and training, Joshua was loyal to his friends, if nothing more, and Mr. Thayer being his employer, he was anxious to protect him and his property.

But, what could he do? Menaced by a revolver, it seemed as though the case was hopeless.

"Hold out your hands!" repeated the stranger imperatively.

The Boy Tenderfoot had reached a decision. Rash, reckless and foolish though it might be, he was resolved to make a bold attempt to defeat the intruder.

He raised his hands, and the man had begun to mutter some commendatory remarks when, with all his power, and with the skill learned from the old French boxing-master, Joshua planted one of his fists under the chin so obligingly held above him.

The blow, though delivered in the dark, was a complete success, and the disappearance of the man from the bedside was followed by a heavy crash as he struck the floor.

Another moment and Joshua was on his feet, and while his loud cries of alarm rung out with startling clearness, he bounded toward the stairs which led to the lower part of the house.

He had moved quickly, but the stranger was not less active, and as Joshua seemed on the eve of success, he was caught by the shoulder and hurled to the floor.

Another moment, and an iron grasp was fixed on his neck and a heavy knee almost crushed his chest.

"You infernal hound!" hissed the stranger,

"you have blocked my game, and now, by Judas, I'll have your life for it!"

Joshua tried to shout again, to free himself from that terrible grasp, but his strength was not equal to the emergency and his efforts were fruitless.

He experienced for the first time in his life, the terrible feeling of strangulation, and with a panorama of colors floating before his eyes, lost consciousness entirely.

CHAPTER VII.

JOSHUA HAS ANOTHER ADVENTURE.

The Boy Tenderfoot was not dead, however, and, after a somewhat lengthy period of unconsciousness, he opened his eyes.

Thoyer was bending over him and immediately hailed his sign of life with joy.

"Boy, what has been the matter here?" he demanded, with considerable excitement.

"Did you catch him?" Joshua asked, sitting upright.

"Catch who?"

"The man that choked me;" and our young hero dismally caressed his neck, which still ached under the pressure it had received.

"Was there a man here?"

"Wal, I guess there was—"

"Who was it?"

"I don't know, no more nor the dead, but I guess I scart him off."

"Tell me all about it."

At that moment Amanda entered the room, a little pale of face but outwardly calm, and from her manner it was plain she had been there before since the assault occurred.

Joshua told his story and Mr. Thayer listened attentively. Still, there was little to be learned—barely the fact that an interloper of some kind had been in the house—and the trio were left to wonder what had been his object.

It was Amanda who made the majority of the suggestions, while Thayer, on his part, looked steadily at vacancy for a long time and seemed considering some matter he did not mention to the younger people.

Whoever the stranger had been, he came no more than night and the following morning found all quiet around the house.

Mr. Thayer seemed strangely gloomy, and, after breakfast, walked over to where Foster, his partner, kept "bachelor's hall" in a very humble sort of a house.

"Halloo!" he said, in surprise, "what brings you over here so early?"

"Sit down," said Thayer, tersely. "I've something to tell you, and it demands careful consideration."

"Well, heave ahead," replied Foster, as he calmly lighted his pipe.

He heard the story of the midnight prowler with interest, but without showing any particular emotion.

"I don't see why you should be stirred up by this affair," he said. "Your red-headed boy scared off the robber, and it will end in your having bolts and bars put on your doors and windows. It's an evil wind that don't blow some one good. The unknown failed to make a raise, but you are taught wisdom."

"Foster," said the senior partner, leaning forward and speaking earnestly. "I had a peculiar dream last night—after that affair occurred."

Foster laughed carelessly.

"What new hobby have you got into your head? You dream periodically, and though none of them ever come to pass, you believe implicitly in the whole lot."

"But I never had one so vivid as this before. Why, the scenes are as plain as though I had seen all in the broad light of day. But, I'll tell you all about it. You remember that—that the men we hired for a private job—"

"Hold up!" said Foster, curtly, as he flashed a quick glance around. "Don't go to harping on that subject."

"Wait. You know what they said was done with the bodies?"

"They chuck'd 'em over a ledge. Yes, yes; I know. Now, let it drop."

"Wait," said Thayer again. "Last night I dreamed that I went to seek the remains of the two men. I found the gulch, but for a long time could find no trace of what I sought. Finally, I came upon two large mounds, such as we see in ordinary churchyards, only larger. Both had gravestones, and I passed around to read the names. They were these of—"

"Will you keep your mouth shut?" growled Foster. Confound it, man, don't you know the very walls have ears sometimes? Babble on, if you must, but call no names."

Thayer passed his hand nervously over his smooth, bland face, and then continued:

"I thought that while I stood there a white form suddenly appeared on his mound, and then, steadily arising, it drifted away in the air, moving toward Buzzard Bar."

"Well, where does the joke come in?" Foster demanded, as the senior partner paused.

"I can't help connecting the two circumstances," said Thayer, nervously. "The specter toward the Bar, and my house was invaded by an enemy."

Foster burst into a loud laugh, but finally grew calmer.

"My dear sir," he said, "you might as well think that an ostrich's legs and a mountain sheep's body ought to be connected, but since you seem to be so much moved, I will remind you that, following such an excitement as last night's scare, it wouldn't have been strange if you had dreamed that Tecumseh was again on the war-path, or that you had reformed and joined a church."

Foster's words proved that he had little faith in what he could not see, and finally Thayer grew more cheerful under his banter, and they walked together to the office.

Joshua was already there, waiting for the door to be opened, and though he had recovered his usual spirits and health, the junior partner could plainly see the succession of red spots on his neck which marked the fingers of the unknown prowler.

The day passed quietly away, the only event of importance being the fact that Joshua went out and purchased a revolver. He had learned to use the weapon in the East, but by advice of his father had taken none to Colorado.

The elder Pepper had been a man of peace.

That night passed without trouble, but during the forenoon Joshua had a surprise.

He was in the office alone, both partners having gone out temporarily, when the door unceremoniously opened and two persons entered.

Joshua looked at them in surprise.

The first was a young lady of nineteen or twenty, a very handsome young lady, too, if Joshua's opinion went for anything, with her curling black hair, sharp black eyes and bright face, while her every movement proclaimed her a different kind of a person than Miss Amanda Thayer or the average product of the Gunnison.

She looked like one born and bred to riches and civilization.

Behind her was a negro of almost gigantic form, a man whose carriage showed that he believed his great strength made amends for his lack of beauty.

The young lady looked keenly at Joshua.

"Is your name Thayer or Foster?" she asked.

"No, marm," said Joshua, politely. "Both on 'em are out, but 'f yeou'll set down yeou can see them putty soon."

"What are you?" she demanded, looking at him in the same sharp manner.

"I'm the book-keeper," Joshua answered, with some dignity.

"Ah! How long do you expect to keep your situation?"

"Wal, I don't know," he answered, in bewilderment.

"Is it worth anything to you?"

"I guess it is. It's all I've got tew depend on fur a livin', an' sech things is hard to get in Colorado."

Joshua spoke very earnestly. It had flashed upon his mind that this self-possessed young woman had designs on his position—that she either desired it for herself or else that she in some way intended to undermine him. Her manner, too, confused and startled him at first, but the latent force of his character came to the service and he resolved to fight rather than surrender.

"Well," she calmly proceeded, "your future depends on your answers to me. Have you ever seen a tall, gray-bearded old gentleman in this office?"

Joshua reflected for a moment and then shook his head.

"Think carefully," said the girl, sharply.

"I'm sure I ain't," he repeated.

"Do Thayer & Foster receive all their business callers here?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, I want you to think once more. If you can recollect that old gentleman, you shall be well paid. Mind now, I don't want you to tell a falsehood to earn your wages, but I want to get tidings of a missing man. Have you no recollection of a quarrel between Thayer & Foster on one side and an aged stranger on the other?"

"No such thing has happened here," said Joshua, positively.

The girl looked still more annoyed, but at that moment the negro, who had used his eyes more than his tongue, spoke to her in a low tone, and she suddenly turned on Josh.

"How long have you been in this office?" she asked.

"Eight days, miss."

The girl turned impatiently from him and helped herself to a chair.

"Sit down, Nemo," she said, to the negro.

The latter obeyed, and Joshua looked at them in an uncertain way. To a certain degree, he felt afraid of this imperious young woman, he was filled with wonder at her singular course, and he resented the way in which she made herself at home in the office.

He therefore scratched his head doubtfully and looked first at her, then at the gigantic negro, and, lastly, at the door, to see if either of the partners would appear.

Suddenly, struck by a brilliant idea, he asked if he should not go for them.

"No," she curtly answered. "You will not leave the room. Nemo, watch the door!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING VISIT.

THIS burly negro moved a little nearer the door, and it dawned upon Joshua that he was practically a prisoner, though why it should be so, he could not guess. For a moment he thought of road-agents and like robbers, but he knew that if these persons were on that errand they would not let the precious moments slip away.

A belligerent feeling began to creep over the youth, and he studied his chances carefully. Near his hand lay a loaded revolver, a potent means of argument in a disputed case.

He glanced at his guests. Nemo, the negro, had two huge revolvers in his belt, and the shawl of the young woman, falling back a little, revealed a twenty-two caliber at her waist.

He had struck a portable battery.

All this went to teach Joshua caution, but his belligerent feelings did not subside.

"See here, naow," he suddenly exclaimed, "what in the name o' time dew yeou 'ean, anyhaow! Be yeou train-robbers or what? Buzzard Bar is a civilized place, an'—"

Joshua stopped short. Just then, Mr. Jared Thayer opened the door and walked into the room. The young woman glanced quickly at Joshua, marked his relieved air, and drew her own conclusions.

Mr. Thayer had observed her, and, with his hat off, was bowing profoundly.

"Good-morning, miss. A lovely morning," he said, in his bland fashion.

"Lovely as a sunflower," she returned, eying him closely. "Are you the man that runs this place?"

"Yes, miss, I am the senior partner of the house of Thayer & Foster."

"I thought so."

"Ah, yes! Is there any way in which I can be of service to you?"

"Yes. You can turn over to me the keys of this place and all other valuables," she returned, in the same curt, uncompromising way in which she had addressed Joshua.

"I—I don't clearly understand," he stammered.

"Perhaps you will when I introduce myself. I am Nora Barr, daughter of Randolph Barr, actual and sole owner of the Tiger Mine."

Straight in the face of the strange girl looked the senior partner. Shortly and clearly she spoke, and on his own part he looked like a man struck by a locomotive.

Surprise, doubt, incredulity and consternation seized upon him, one after the other, and he sat in his chair without motion, a strange pallor on his clerical-looking face.

It was some moments before he found words in which to make reply, and when he managed to do so it was not very coherently.

"Who? What—what did you say?"

"I do not see the need of repeating it, but, to convince you that I am what I claim, I will go over the ground more fully. Some months ago one Randolph Barr, of Washington, purchased the Tiger Mine. He took it without examination, to settle a debt, where he would otherwise have got nothing. Then he sent a lawyer on here to examine the property, but the man returned to Washington and said the claim was a 'salted' one and worthless. Some weeks passed on, and Mr. Barr had almost forgotten the mine

when he received information that it was being worked by Thayer & Foster illegally, and that it was paying well."

"A remarkable story," murmured the senior partner, caressing his chin.

"It is, as you well know, for the Washington lawyer, on arriving here, fell into your tender hands, and it was a present from you that induced him to return East and report the mine worthless."

"Is this tale copyrighted?" blandly inquired Mr. Thayer, once more fully himself.

"No, sir. It is in such a state that it will soon be common property, unless you surrender the mine. That, however, is copyrighted, and the Barr family will allow no trespassing. You must surrender the property."

The senior partner smiled in a forbearing way.

"My dear child," he said, "you are laboring under a mistake. Mr. Foster and myself are the sole owners of the Tiger. We bought the mine and paid for it, and that releases us from all obligations to this Randolph Barr—your father, did you say?"

"My father, sir."

"Why is he not here to present this remarkable claim?"

"I suspect, sir, that you can answer that question better than any one else," said Nora, beginning with some anger, but speaking steadily at the end.

"How so, Miss Barr?"

"My father, sir, left the East some weeks ago to demand his rights of you. He wrote me from Denver, and then followed utter silence. I did not delay long, but followed in his footsteps. I have traced him to Crested Butte, which place he left in company with one Paul Wilbur, an experienced miner, and there the trail ends. They did not reach Buzzard Bar. What, sir, became of them?"

"Perhaps they are at Irwin or Gothic."

Nora made an impatient gesture.

"Let us not deal in suppositions, Mr. Thayer. I believe that you know what became of them?"

"I?"

"You, sir."

Mr. Thayer was looking at her steadfastly. If there was anything he wished to conceal, the mask was skillfully drawn over his smooth, bland face. He would have served as a model of a Sunday school superintendent, greatly surprised at some unimportant thing.

"I don't exactly understand," he said, slowly. "I am not the keeper of Randolph Barr."

"You do well to quote those words," retorted the girl. "They were those of the first Cain; they have been used by many a subsequent murderer. So you are in doubt? Well, sir, to make all plain to you, I will say that I believe you heard of the coming of my father, and that you contrived to have him assassinated on the way here!"

The accusation was at last made, and then followed a dead silence of several seconds. Thayer looked greatly horrified, but Nora faced him steadily, studying his smooth face, and Nemo, the negro, stood behind her chair with a face that was like marble, though there was a slight glitter in his eyes and his gigantic form looked very impressive.

Joshua, on his part, though a looker-on in Venice, had grown very much interested. He was a young man who believed in right and justice, and, though Thayer was his employer, his sympathies went over to Nora Barr, to stay until Thayer had proved his innocence.

The latter was the coolest person there. Once only, since the interview began, had he shown confusion, something he was not likely to do again.

"My dear young woman," he said, at last, with the old calmness, "you surely cannot be aware of the gravity of your charges. If a man had spoken thus to me, I would throw him from my office. I make due allowance for your youth, but, really, you must speak less positively. You are accusing me of being a murderer."

"I am, sir!"

"Can you prove it?"

"At present, no."

"Then do not make the charge."

There was a threatening undercurrent in Thayer's voice as he spoke.

"Well, sir, we will drop that part of the matter for the present. When will you be ready to surrender the mine?"

Thayer frowned.

"Let us end this nonsense," he said, curtly. "I have bought the Tiger and paid for it; I have all of the papers to prove the fact, and Thayer & Foster are the sole owners."

"They do not own a square inch of it!" re-

torted Nora, boldly. "If you have papers such as you mention, they are forgeries."

"Carefully, Miss Barr!" cautioned Thayer, his smooth face changing expression.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that, unless you use more civil language, I shall eject you from my office."

"By force?"

"If necessary, yes."

Nora smiled and turned toward Nemo. His black lips parted responsively, and, as she laid her hand on his arm, he drew himself up to his full height.

"This man," said Miss Barr, "is my protector. You can see his size and strength, and I need only add that he goes well armed and is a dead shot, for you to perceive that he is dangerous when angered. Nemo would risk his life for me, so, if I were you, I would not try violence, Mr. Thayer."

The mine-owner glared at Nemo, but made no reply. In fact, he had none suited to the occasion. He would not yield, and he dared not anger the giant.

Before the silence was broken by any of them the door opened, and Foster, the junior partner, entered, accompanied by two other men. Nemo stooped and whispered to his mistress, and she arose quietly.

"Shall I see you at Magoffin's hotel, this afternoon, Mr. Thayer?" she asked.

"Yes, yes; I'll be there promptly," said he, glad to get rid of the girl at such an awkward moment.

"I will expect you then."

She bowed and slowly withdrew, followed by Nemo and the wondering stares of Foster and the other new-comers; but when they questioned Thayer, and rallied him on his fair caller, he had no words which seemed suitable to cover the ground.

The man was in a panic, but Nora had rashly given him a breathing spell, and he meant to use it somehow.

CHAPTER IX.

JOSHUA OVERHEARS A CONFERENCE.

UNDER the banter of the new-comers, who were surprised to find so pretty and refined a girl as Nora Barr in the office of Thayer & Foster, the senior partner soon recovered his outward composure and settled down to business.

Joshua Pepper, too, was engaged on his proper work, but his mind was not with his fingers. He wrote absently, though correctly, and all the while thought of Nora Barr.

Our young friend had not fallen in love, however, for the young lady, being two or three years his senior, was a woman where he was a boy.

Still, Joshua was interested, and in the light of what she had said to Thayer he forgot her treatment of himself. She had charged his employer with having put her father out of his way. Good heavens! was such a thing possible?

This was the question which surged through the clerk's mind as he worked, and he would have given much to know. He believed in justice, and if he had known which side was right, would have quickly thrown his sympathies accordingly.

When the visitors were gone the partners held a long conference together, and Joshua watching them, felt his faith in them waver. They had drawn to one side, and spoke in tones inaudible to him, which in itself was suspicious. If they had nothing to hide would they not be willing to face Nora Barr before all the world?

Anon, Thayer arose and went to his clerk's side.

"Joshua," he blandly said, "you heard the talk of that crazy girl who was here, didn't you?"

"I heered it—yes," said Josh, slowly.

"Well, I wish you to say nothing about the matter. I shall send word to Crested Butte, or even to Denver, and learn from what asylum she escaped, but the matter must be kept quiet. It would injure us and make our business poor if it was known. So it is to your advantage as well as ours that you say nothing."

Mr. Thayer rubbed his chin, and looked like a Sunday-school teacher more than ever.

"Yes, sir, of course," answered Joshua, awkwardly, for he dreaded a direct call for a promise.

Luckily, two speculators came in at that moment and the conversation was interrupted; but Thayer left them to Foster, and himself went out with a business-like air.

Joshua saw nothing of him after that for several hours. Business went on as usual, and Foster did not refer to the impending trouble. The clerk wondered if Thayer had called at Ma-

Josh, the Boy Tenderfoot.

goffin's, according to his promise, and what had been the result.

The day drew near an end. Foster was beginning to straighten his papers, and Jo-hua breathed a sigh of relief. He would soon be out in the open air.

His chair was near a window which was open, and suddenly voices sounded outside the building.

Every word said was audible to Joshua; he could only have escaped hearing by leaving his chair.

"What evil wind blew them here, I don't know," said a voice which was plainly that of Thayer; "but I see no room to doubt the truth of her claim. Beyond a question, she is the daughter of old Barr."

"Makes it kinder awk'ard fur you," said a second and rougher voice.

"Awkward? well, I should say so. Worse than that—it means *ruin*, unless the thing is nipped in the bud. Men, the girl and the nigger must be served as old Barr was served!"

"If you want it done, we are the boys for the job," broke in a third voice.

Joshua started. He had recognized the peculiar tones of Dave French.

"It must be done," Thayer declared. "What are your terms?"

"Same as in ther other case."

"Both for that figure?"

"It depends on ther amount o' work. Ef we git 'em out o' ther way easy, ther money will kiver ther hull bill. Ef thar is trouble, it must be doubled."

"I agree to the terms. When will you strike?"

"Ter-night."

"Very good. Do the job as faithfully as you did the other, and you shall never repent it."

"Jest you trust ter us, boss," said Dave French, confidently. "Ther gal an' ther nig will never be heerd on ag'in."

"Excellent—excellent. And now, hadn't you better go over to Magoffin's and get the lay of the land? Jack is my friend, and he will tell ou just where they sleep, so you need make no mistake."

"All right, boss; we'll see you later," returned Dave, and then the conference ended.

It left Joshua dumfounded and horrified. He had been a chance listener to a plot to commit wanton and deliberate murder. They had spoken plainly; there could be no doubt about it.

Thayer had hired Dave French and another man, whom Jack had finally discovered to be Sile Barker, to kill Nora Barr and Nemo; and this fact served to convince the clerk that his employer had indeed removed Randolph Barr in the same fashion.

He felt horror and indignation, and his first impulse was to rush out and betray the plotters. But to whom should he go? Buzzard Bar had neither mayor, judge nor justice—there was no one to act on a complaint.

Second thought convinced the Boy Tenderfoot that he must proceed cautiously. He was not a fool by any means, and he was wise enough to know that the word of the wealthy mine-owner would go further than that of an unknown and friendless young man—a "tenderfoot," like himself.

Consequently, though he firmly resolved to throw all his aid in behalf of Nora Barr, he was not anxious to show his hand.

While he was still thinking, Forster arose and announced that the day's work was over, and Joshua was not long in getting out of the office. He did not wish to encounter Thayer.

Darkness was beginning to fall, and yet it would not do for him to go to the senior partner's house for supper—the meeting he dreaded would surely occur then.

"I'll go over to Magoffin's, right away," he finally decided. "I can git supper there, an', mebbe, I'll see the negro an' git a chance tew warn him."

He went as he had said, but Nemo was not in the bar room. The only occupants of the room were Pistol Pete, Sam Crowell, Abe Tyler and one stranger. This latter man was doing a good deal of talking, and announced himself as "Roaring Ben Bundy, right from ther mountains o' Montana," but Joshua paid little attention to him.

He wanted information of Nora and Nemo.

Finally, he walked up to the bar, purchased a poor cigar at a good, round price, and, having thus won Jack Magoffin's good will, proceeded to talk about minor matters until he deemed it safe to speak of the one nearest his heart.

When that time came, he met with disappointment. Miss Barr and her companion

were not in the hotel; they had gone out, half an hour before, and Magoffin had no idea where they were to be found.

Joshua resumed his seat, uncertain what he should do next, though keenly alive to the necessity of warning the young woman as soon as possible; but in the midst of his reflections he had a sudden idea.

"By gosh!" he thought, "I'll bet they hav gone tew the mine!"

The idea, strong at the beginning, gained force as he reflected further. Rash though it certainly was, what would be more natural than that Nora should wish to look upon the property she claimed?

A little more thought on the subject, and then Joshua slipped quietly out of Magoffin's and took his way toward the mine, which was situated a fourth of a mile beyond the straggling cabins of the village.

He soon left the latter behind and went along the dim trail at a trot.

For the time, he was entirely forgetting the hired assassins, but he was a person easily impressed by circumstances, and, as he neared a line of trees which grew by the path, the sight of two men brought him to a sudden stop.

These men were standing directly in the path and looking in the direction of the mine, and though he would ordinarily have paid no attention to them, he somehow felt a touch of suspicion on this occasion.

He stepped into the shadow of the bushes and looked at them sharply. The darkness was against him, but as he looked he was struck by what he believed to be a strong resemblance to Dave French and Sile Barker.

"I'll find out, anyway," he declared, to himself.

And in a moment more he was creeping along on his hands and knees, keeping close to the bushes and always watching the two men.

Just then, he did not pause to reflect that he was doing a rash thing. Men bent on murder are always dangerous persons to anger, and in wild lands like the Gunnison, in particular, it is not wise to be caught meddling with another person's private affairs.

Joshua, however, had undergone quite a change since the night he had crept timidly into Magoffin's, an utter stranger. Whether it was Colorado air or something else is uncertain, but he was developing a spirit of venturesomeness which was rather dangerous to a tenderfoot.

In a short time he had advanced far enough to settle the question in his mind—the two men, who still watched the northern trail closely, were right in the path by which Nora and Nemo would naturally return if they had been to the Tiger Mine, and Joshua had no doubt but what a tragedy was liable to occur.

CHAPTER X. THE AMBUSH.

THE Boy Tenderfoot began to be somewhat excited. He had not been long enough in the Gunnison to take adventure as a matter of course; while for the crime he believed projected he had utmost horror.

A lifetime of wild adventure could not bring him to look lightly upon the taking of human life.

All his thoughts now became directed to saving Nora Barr and her servant, and as there seemed to be but one way of doing it, he resolved to retreat from his perilous position, make a *detour* and gain the northern trail in time to warn them.

This movement required some time and caution, but at the end of ten minutes he was opposite the ambushed men, creeping along among the rocks which formed the only cover on the left of the trail; and with a fair prospect of succeeding in his object.

Suddenly, however, Dave and Sile stirred into animation, he heard one of them say, "They are comin'," and then the villainous pair drew back into the edge of the bushes.

Joshua looked excitedly up the trail. Sure enough, two persons were approaching, and it did not require a second glance to show him that they were Nora and Nemo.

Neither of the two had a double near the Bar.

One moment Joshua was at fault and almost alarmed. The persons he would save were so near at hand that they could not be saved from an attack, and if he sprung out to warn them he would very likely become a target for the revolvers of the assassins.

Then his wits cleared somewhat.

"Hold on there!" he shouted, in a clear voice.

"Ef yeou try tew pass them bushes yeou are dead coons, sure as shootin'!"

Miss Barr and her servant suddenly halted, looking toward Joshua's cover. He was about to show himself when a curse sounded from the bushes and the would-be assassins leaped forth and turned their faces toward the girl and her black protector.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Joshua, "there is goin' tew be a fight arter all. Sakes alive! what can I dew? Run tew the village—no, they'll be dead afore I go ten rod—I must fight!"

It was a great decision to arrive at, for the Boy Tenderfoot had never been in a serious encounter, but he cocked his revolver and ran forward.

Meanwhile the ambushers, who seemed to have forgotten the warning voice, were closing in on Nora and the negro.

The click of two revolvers, one after the other, was a suggestive interpolation at that moment.

"Halt there!" said Nora, sharply. "If you advance further, you are dead men!"

Dave and his partner paused. They saw that they were just then covered by the shining tubes and they had a due regard for their lives; but for the two persons opposed to them—a negro and a girl—they had the utmost contempt.

They had only to throw them off their guard and a little shooting on their own part would end the affair.

Dave at once feigned innocence.

"Say, look out!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? We are friends, you know. We come right here from Jack Magoffin ter tell ye thar is a riot at ther village an' you had better lay low."

"Don't you believe him!" cried Joshua, leaping out from behind a rock. "They two were hid here tew kill yeou, an' I know it!"

"Brindle Josh!"

"Ther infernal tenderfoot!"

Sile and Dave spoke almost simultaneously, and there was murder in their looks as they faced the new-comer; but, the ice once broken, the latter faced the music bravely.

"Yeou needn't stare me, yeou 'tarnal scalawags!" was his sturdy defiance. "I know yeou an' all abeout yeou, but I guess yeour game won't work. Young woman, they was hid in them bushes tew shoot yeou—I heerd them plan the hull business."

Both the assassins gave the accuser the lie direct, but Nora, still keeping her revolver well up, coolly interrupted:

"There is no need of wasting words on the subject. Whether such was your object or not, the game won't work. You two can go your way as soon as you see fit. The sooner it is, the better I shall be pleased."

"Dar's der road, you-'uns," said Nemo, in a deep, rumbling voice, as he stretched his hand northward. "Does we see you trabelin'?"

"No, by ther Eternal!" said Dave French. "I don't go until I git squar' with this tenderfoot. He has lied about me, an' he has got ter swaller his words. Out with yer shooter, you young calf an' show your blood!"

"My 'shooter' is out," retorted Joshua, with surprising coolness, "an' I'll use it, tew, ef yeou don't keep where yeou b'long."

"Haw! haw!" roared Sile Barker, with forced mirth. "Just hear him! It's Brindle Josh that's a-tootin' his horn."

"Enough of this talk," said Nora Barr, with keen decision. "We stay here no longer. You can do as you see fit. Mr. Joshua, will you go with us?"

Even then, despite the danger they were in, the tenderfoot felt a thrill of pride at being thus addressed. He promptly moved to Nora's side and faced the ruffians.

"You had better git eout o' the way or there will be a fuss. Make way, there, for we won't turn eout. Ef yeou want tew shoot, try yeour luck on them trees. Look eout, Dave French, I'm watchin' yeou, an' gum games won't work."

The ambushers stepped aside, but both Joshua and Nemo scented mischief in their sudden silence, and the fact that they moved to opposite sides of the trail, and they were watched by keener eyes than they thought.

Perhaps the trio were a foot past them when the huge negro wheeled with wonderful agility. He had seen Sile Barker's hand go up, and there could be no doubt of its meaning.

Wheeling, the black struck two blows in rapid succession. The first sent Sile's revolver flying into the bushes, and the second drove its master crashing on the same road.

Then Nemo turned to see Joshua once more menacing Dave French with his revolver.

"No, yeou don't!" said the tenderfoot, with the coolness of a veteran. "There ain't no 'arthly way fur yeou tew git the best on us, an' yeou may as wal give it up."

"What he try ter do?" asked Nemo, in his deep, rumbling voice.

"To shoot us," answered Nora, quickly.

"Hi! I smash him head all to pieces—"

The negro paused, for Dave, really alarmed at last, and knowing he would be no more than a child in the hands of the turly black, had executed some sort of a somersault and disappeared from view with great haste.

"We go on now," said Nemo, instantly, and with commendable coolness.

It was good advice, and they acted upon it at once. There was nothing like improving the time the ambushers would necessarily require to regain a hostile footing.

"Walk beside of me, and let Nemo bring up the rear," said Nora, addressing Joshua; and then, as he obeyed: "You are Thayer's clerk, I believe?"

"I have be'n, but I dunno as I shall be any longer," said he, ruefully.

"Why?"

"It was him that hired these chaps ter kill you."

"Thayer?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I heard the hull talk."

"Excellent. But—but why did you side with me?"

"Gosh all hemlocks! yeou don't s'pose I was goin' tew set still an' see murder did, do you?"

"It seems not, and I thank you most cordially for what you have done. I suppose I was very rash to go out as I did, but—well, never mind. Will you come to Magoffin's hotel and tell me all about this affair?"

"Yes, fur I can't very wal go anywhere else."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MOB.

THE return to the village was quickly made, and though Nemo, as a rear guard, kept a sharp lookout, he saw nothing of Dave or Sile.

Nora had relapsed into silence, and Joshua was glad that it was so. He had already begun to think of his own future. By his recent course he had lost all chance of further service with Thayer & Foster, even if he was inclined to serve such villains, for Dave French would convey to the senior partner the story of the fruitless attack.

The idea that he might yet work as one the gang of the Tiger mine did not occur to him, for he did not for a moment think that Nora Barr could conquer the present occupants in the fight she had begun.

When the hotel was reached they went straight to Nora's room, where Joshua told her and the negro all he knew about the late attack. Neither seemed alarmed at the news, and it was plain that Nora, though but nineteen years of age, had the wit of a maturer person and the courage of a man.

She had before believed that her father had been murdered by Thayer, and now, with her suspicions strengthened, she resolved to fight him to the bitter end.

The trio were still talking when they heard a series of shouts outside, but such things were so common at Buzzard Bar that no notice was taken of it.

A little later, however, there was a knock at the door and Nemo opened to see Jack Magoffin standing outside. The landlord's face bore a troubled look.

"I hope you'll s'cuse me for troublin' yer, an' fur bein' ther b'arer o' bad news, but ef you hev looked outer ther winder you hev see'd that ther boyees are up an' at it."

Just then another subdued howl floated upon the air.

"At what, Mr. Magoffin?" Nora asked.

"Somebody's drunk," said Joshua.

"I'd be glad ef that was all," and Jack looked regretfully at Nora. "In plain words, mum, ther boyees sez you are Lightnin' Kate an' they wants you."

"Lightning Kate? And who is that, sir?"

"A female road-agent that has been operatin' around Ruby an' that region. She allays has a big darky with her, an' that's what's ther matter. Ef it's all right, I hope you kin prove it."

Magoffin pulled his beard vigorously. He was a man on the sunny side of thirty-five and had not outgrown his fondness for pretty women; and as Nora Barr was all of that, his sympathies

were with her whether she was Lightning Kate or a traveling missionary.

Still, he expected to see her roughly used and did not intend to risk the safety of his house by taking her part. "Lightning Kate" had done a good deal of business through the Gunnison, of late, and when once caught, nothing could save her from punishment.

Magoffin, however, did not think best to inform his guest that the Buzzard Barites were howling for her blood, or that they had a rope in the crowd; nor was she sufficiently acquainted with Colorado fashions to suspect her danger.

"I certainly am not 'Lightning Kate,'" she said, lightly. "The gentlemen are mistaken."

"Mebbe, ef you tell 'em so it will all be right," suggested Magoffin.

"That will be the best way. I'll show myself at the window and convince them they are wrong."

Nora turned to carry out her idea, with Nemo close beside her. Joshua glanced first at Jack and then stepped to her side and spoke in a subdued voice.

"Dew you smell a mice?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll bet yeou ten cents that Thayer or Dave French is at the bottom on this all. Somebody has struck a match, an' I s'pect them 'tarnal critters."

Nora paused abruptly. His theory was not a wild or improbable one. Just then an impatient howl arose from the mob and she shivered slightly.

"Don't yeou be afearred—yeou've got tew men at yeour back that'll see yeou safet through," said Joshua, encouragingly.

She gave him her hand, uttered a few words of thanks, and then walked bravely to the window.

Another howl from the mob greeted her, but her face was composed and firm. All Buzzard Bar seemed to have turned out, and the space in front of the hotel was filled.

"There she is!"

"That's Lightnin' Kate!"

"Bring ther rope!"

Such were the shouts which arose from the excited miners only a few feet below her, but she put out her hand and a hush fell over them.

"Gentlemen," she said, in a clear voice, "there are times when I should feel honored by such a call from the men of Buzzard Bar, but when I am told that the visit is really meant for one, 'Lightning Kate,' I am at first jealous and then relieved, when I hear you shout so angrily. But, gentlemen, you are entirely mistaken; I am not Lightning Kate."

The hush continued for a moment, showing that they were influenced by her words, and then a man pressed to the front.

"I'm Roaring Ben Bundy, ther Wanderin' Jew o' Colorado. I've see'd ther hull State an' all o' its curiosities, an' here am I ter swear ther gal speaks straight—she are not Lightnin' Kate!"

"You are a liar!" shouted an angry voice; and Joshua clutched his revolver tightly as he saw Dave French press to the front.

There was now no doubt about the origin of the plot against Nora.

Roaring Ben Bundy, however, claimed the attention of all at this moment. Evidently his word of honor was something he held sacred, for Dave had scarcely made his accusation when he went down under a heavy blow from Bundy's fist.

This was enough to set the mob on fire, for the Colorado rioter is a man who only needs the touch of a match to "go off," and in a moment more other men took a hand in the affair, and a model free fight began.

If it had been one of blows alone it would soon have been over, but the cracking of revolvers was also heard, and knives flashed in the red light sent out from Jack Magoffin's hotel sign.

Joshua Pepper wheeled like a flash.

"Naow is yeour time," he said, addressing Nora. "Them chaps has got other business for a few minutes, an' by the time they git over we can have sneaked eout o' the back way an' gi'n 'em the slip."

"No; I stand my ground!" said Nora, firmly. "If I flee it will look like guilt."

"Brindle Josh are in the right, marm, beggin' yer pardon fur chippin' in," said Magoffin. "I tell you them galoots outside are *bad*; thar's blood in their eyes, sure. Ther best thing you kin do is ter vamose, an' lay low till ther thing blows over."

"Bes' way," said Nemo, nodding his head rapidly. "Dey holler 'bout a rope, an' dat means a hangin' scrape, for sure. Less we run, Miss Nora?"

"Do as you think best. Yes, we'll go," said the girl, shivering as a fresh chorus of yells arose from the fighting miners.

Little needed to be done in the way of preparation. Nora had brought no baggage to the Gunnison, and it only remained for Jack Magoffin to show them the rear door, deserted recklessly by those who wished to see the free fight, and then Nora, Joshua and Nemo went out into the light.

"Thank ther Lord, they're gone!" said Magoffin.

Then he went to his bar-room, stood before a four-by-six looking-glass and, with a bottle, deliberately bruised his forehead until blood showed on the skin; after which he went up stairs and laid peacefully down on the floor.

What was Magoffin's little game?

Simply this: When the rioters found their victims gone, they would be likely to suspect the landlord of helping them off but if they found him on the floor insensible and bleeding, they would at once see that he had been knocked down by the desperate fugitives and his precious head would be safe.

So reasoned the astute Magoffin.

Meanwhile, Joshua, Nora and Nemo had left the hotel and were speeding toward safety. No words passed between them, but the former was silently given the place of leader and he set his face toward the north-western mountains and pressed on rapidly.

Brief as had been his stay in Colorado, he knew something of the temper of its mobs, and he was sure Nora's only hope was to hide in such a place for a while at least.

They left the village behind in a short time, but Joshua noticed that the sounds of fighting at Magoffin's had died away, and he paused in uncertainty.

"There's two ways fur us naow," he said slowly. "The shortest is right across the field yeou see yester, but if we go that way we want tew make sure o' a good start. T'other way is round thar through the bushes. Naow, dew yeou two go ahead tew that single tree yeou see yester, an' then look back. If you hear nothin', keep ahead across the field, but ef yeou hear a whistle, turn ter the right an' make off through the bushes. In either case, I'll ketch up with yeou."

A few more words and all was clear, and then away went Nora and the negro, while Joshua stood at his post and watched the rear.

He was very much afraid the rioters would at once appear, but several minutes passed before there was any sign. Then their yells grew fiercer and he saw them approaching.

They were too late to be dangerous, however. Nora and Nemo were, or should be, well advanced on the plain, and the tenderfoot champion felt light of heart as he dashed along in the rear.

As he reached the edge of the level he experienced a revulsion of feeling. A female form stepped into view, and, thinking it was Nora, he cried out sharply:

"Good heavens! be yeou here? Why the mob is a-comin'—git intew them bushes, quick!"

"Not so fast, Josh Pepper!" retorted an angry voice. "It isn't your adored Lightning Kate. She is safe in the hands of the miners and her big darky is dead. All that is my work, and now I am going to take you to the mob, as you call it, to suffer for helping an outlaw and for your treachery to my father."

The speaker poured out her long address rapidly and vehemently, and Josh could see a revolver covering his person.

"Amanda Thayer!" he almost gasped.

"Yes, it's I," returned the girl, "and yon see I am your master. You thought you could play fast and loose with my father, but you see I hold the drop. My revolver means sure death if you stir."

Joshua hesitated. Just then a shout arose in the rear, and, looking around, he saw the rioters rushing down upon them, several of the foremost bearing torches, and all evidently yelling for somebody's life.

CHAPTER XII.

A SERIES OF WILD EVENTS.

FOR one moment Josh Pepper hesitated, but as he remembered that Colorado mobs had an unpleasant fashion of enthroning Judge Lynch when there was trouble in the camp, he made up his mind that he might as well die for a sheep as a lamb.

Amanda might miss; Judge Lynch would not.

Hardly pausing to turn his head, he bounded toward Miss Thayer with almost incredible agility.

"Crack!"

Her revolver sounded and he heard the bullet whistle past his ear, but, luckily, it was no worse. Another moment and he had seized her wrist, forcing her hand, revolver and all, high above her head.

"Drop that revolver or yeou'll fare hard, and be mighty quick about it," almost hissed the tenderfoot. "It's death for sure ef them men ketch me—drop the revolver, I say!"

It was a critical moment, for the rioters, guided by the shot, were close at hand, their torches revealing their persons with startling distinctness; but a vigorous wrench disarmed the girl and the revolver dropped from her hand, Joshua caught it, pushed her aside and resumed his flight at full speed.

He had no doubt of his ability to escape, but he knew not what to think about Nora Barr and the negro. Had Amanca spoken truly when she said that misfortune had overtaken them?

He felt an uncomfortable conviction that it was so, and, wheeling, he left the open land and plunged into the bushes. Three or four shots followed his retreat, and proved that the miners were fully in earnest.

The fugitive did not pause, but ran on as fast as possible, his face toward the higher mountains.

He was still going when he heard his name pronounced in tones so clear as to leave no doubt about it, and he hesitated and fixed his gaze upon the point from which came the sound.

"Don't shoot!" said a rough voice; "I'm a friend ter your crowd from the word go, an' hyer I am."

With the last words the speaker emerged from a thicket, and Joshua at once recognized Roaring Ben Bundy. He remembered that the man had spoken for Nora at Magoffin's, but he was still cautious.

"I reckin ther blood-drinkers are off ther trail fur awhile," continued Bundy, "an' ef you will hold up a bit I hev a word fur yer private ear."

"What is it?" Joshua tersely asked.

"Ther gal is in ther hands o' ther Philistines an' ther darky is shooched."

"How do you know?"

"I see'd it, but I couldn't do no good. Ther other gal it was that did ther mischief. Durn her milk-an'-water cast o' phiz, she is a scratchin'-cat jest like old Thayer."

"Yeou seem tew know them wal."

"Oh, yer can't tell me much about old hoss-fly an' his colt. I've see'd 'em afore ter-night. Wal, as I was a-sayin', t'other gal—what's her name?"

"Nora Barr."

"Yas, Wal, old Thayer has got her in pusion, an' he first shotched ther darky an' then rolled him inter ther kenyon over yonder. So I heerd 'Mandy say."

"Then the poor feller is gone up, sure."

"Yas, but ther gal ain't. She still lives, but ther is no knowin' how long she will chew air ef old Thayer has his way. Say, is she Lightnin' Kate?"

"No; not a bit on't."

"I thought so. Wal, see hyar. I've see'd you an' yer way o' fightin', an' I must say I like it. I'm a tough old rooster myself, with nary chick nor chile, an' I do love a row. Tell ye what—if you want a pard fur ther fight, hyar I be, an' I'm fit ter tie to. What do you say?"

The bluff manner of the man impressed Joshua favorably, and he fell into line. The two clasped hands and the bargain was made.

"Now, see yer," said Bundy, "we ain't got a minute ter lose. Let's trot around these skunks, git back ter town an' see what we kin do fur ther gal."

"Where will they take her?"

"Lord, I dunno; but what I'm afeerd on is that they will hang her. They ain't delicate-minded at all, an' down at Ruby, Gothic an' Irwin they are jest pantin' ter eend ter career o' Lightnin' Kate. Now, it is ther leetle game o' ther oppersition ter make et out that this gal is Kate, an' it only needs a leetle fuel on ther fire to give her over ter Jedge Lynch. You sarv?"

"Yes, but, by gosh! I'll kill the hull on 'em afore they shall harm her. Come on, Ben, an' we'll fight like burly ef need be."

The new partners left the spot, made a *detour* by which they avoided the men who were searching for them, and in this way re-entered the town.

Only half of the people had gone in pursuit of the fugitives, so there was still considerable animation in the village. Torches had appeared

in large numbers from somewhere, and the center of the illumination was near the house of Jared Thayer. They went that way, and, hovering around the outskirts of the crowd before the door, saw Thayer himself on the steps delivering a speech.

His first words, uttered after their arrival, were very suggestive.

"My own advice, fellow-citizens, is that we at once put an end to her villainy. Why should we hesitate? As one of you has said, the people of Gothic want her for their own vengeance, but so do the people of Ruby and Irwin, of Pittsburg and Spider Bar. They can't all have her, and I'm afraid that if we hesitate, she will in some way slip through our fingers."

"Buzzard Bar don't want ter hang a woman," stoutly said a veteran miner.

"Nor we ain't sure this is Lightnin' Kate," added another.

"Our young friend, David French, will swear to the last part," said Thayer, in his oily way.

At this point Joshua touched Bundy on the arm.

"While they quarrel, we must act," the Boy Tenderfoot decidedly said. "Foller me!"

They went around the crowd, taking advantage of the darkness, and approached the rear of the house. They were not certain Nora was there, but the chances were in favor of the theory.

"I'm goin' in at the winder," said Joshua, quietly. "Yeou give me a boost an' then wait for the result."

Bundy raised him carefully and he shoved up the window easily. Within was an untenanted room, though it was partially lighted by the gleam from the open door which led to the next apartment.

Joshua was aware that he was venturing into the lion's den with a vengeance. Jared Thayer knew all about his treachery by that time, and if he once fell into his hands he would fare badly; but the blood of the youth was fully aroused, and in that crisis he forgot that he was a "tenderfoot."

Through the window he went, and then, with cautious steps, he crept to the open door beyond. What he saw did not astonish him.

The room had two occupants. In a chair sat Nora Barr, her face paler than ever he had seen it before, but her manner brave and calm; and at the outside door, leaning against its side, the junior partner of the house of Thayer & Foster was listening to the speech of his senior.

The outer door being open gave Joshua a view of Thayer and the mob, and it also showed him that he would have hard work to get Nora away unseen.

Her hands and feet were bound, and, in order to reach her, he must surely be seen by Foster.

"I must silence him!" thought the young man.

Foster, as he leaned against the doorway, seemed to have no fear of trouble, but he held in his hand a revolver which hung loosely at his side. He and that weapon must be silenced.

Nora saw the tenderfoot and a smile actually crossed her face, but he had his fingers across his lips and began creeping toward the burly Foster.

Few boys of seventeen would have cared to attack such a man, but Joshua had already found that victory is not always to the physical giant.

Nearer and nearer the young tenderfoot crept, while Foster still looked and listened, unconscious of the peril behind him. It was fortunate for Nora Barr that he did not then glance toward her.

The discussion outside was still unfinished, and Foster was deeply interested in the success of his villainous partner—a most fortunate circumstance for Nora and her champion.

The tenderfoot reached Foster's side, and, stooping a little, wrenched the revolver from his grasp, at the same time knocking his feet from under him and bringing him to the floor.

Fate sometimes plays queer tricks, and, just then, when Joshua had done what seemed sure to result in an alarm, fate willed it that Foster, in falling, should strike his head against the side of the doorway and dash out his senses for the time.

His assailant had his hand quickly on his throat, but one glance was enough to show him that he was not then dangerous.

Springing away from him, Joshua quickly cut Nora's bands, and then pointed to the door through which he had entered.

"Not a word now!" he cautiously said.

Nora nodded and hastened into the rear room. One glance was enough to show Joshua that

Ben Bundy was still at his post, and it was the work of only a brief space of time to lower Nora to his arms.

Joshua quickly followed.

"Let's pile out o' hyar on ther jump," Bundy somewhat excitedly said. "Our only safety is in ther mountains. We kin all hide ther. Come on!"

They started, but only a few rods had been covered when a series of angry yells arose from near the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

To all appearances Jared Thayer and his tools had their scheme for lynching Nora Barr well in hand. They had made the miners believe that she was "Lightning Kate," the road-agent, swindler and murderer, and all knew that person deserved rough treatment, but there were men in the town who were as honest and worthy as any living man, and they soon came to the surface.

When once Nora was caught and caged, the opposition was begun, and where Thayer believed he could carry all before him he found a tremendous opposition.

There were men there who did not regard Nora's identity as Lightning Kate proven, and men who did not believe in lynching anyway, and there were a good many who would not see their young town disgraced by any such act as the hanging of a woman, guilty or innocent.

If this girl was the female road-agent, let her be carried to Denver and delivered to the proper authorities.

All these law-abiding citizens came to the surface when Thayer tried to run the town, and while Foster guarded (?) the prisoner, the senior partner poured out his eloquence to effect his object.

Anon he chanced to look around, and then he was amazed to see Foster lying motionless in the doorway. He sprung back a pace and looked for Nora, for he could not ascribe Foster's condition to any ordinary cause.

The girl was gone!

Then the discomfited plotter wheeled upon the crowd, announced the fact and threw out all the injurious hints he could think of, whereupon arose a cry started by his friends.

Dave French and Sile Barker were still there, and they it was who shouted so vigorously for Thayer.

In the midst of it all Foster suddenly arose to his feet.

"Where is he?—where is that imp of Satan?" he somewhat wildly demanded.

"Whom do you mean?" Thayer asked.

"Ther infernal tenderfoot."

"Josh Pepper?"

"Yes, yes. It was he that did it. He knocked me over and ran away with the girl. Where is French? Gods! we must be up and doing or the game is lost."

A terrible howl arose from Dave when he learned that "Brindle Josh" was the cause of the new mishap. He had hated him most cordially before, but this added fresh fuel to the fire.

It was not hard to surmise the direction in which the fugitives would go, and in a short time Dave and Sile had a dozen men at their back and were off on the trail like a pack of bloodhounds.

Away to the northwest of Buzzard Bar was the country any fugitive would naturally seek, and it was about as rough one as could be found in the Gunnison. A series of ridges ran up and down the side of the mountain, and there was found about every feature of nature common to mountain lands.

The timber was principally pine, some of the ridges being heavily wooded; but there were other places where rocks held high carnival, and cliffs were numerous and caves no great novelty.

It was toward this country that Josh Pepper had headed when he succeeded in getting Nora Barr started on their flight.

The yells of Thayer's tools aroused them to every possible exertion, and Ben Bundy caught Nora's arm, and they swept on across the open field before mentioned as fast as possible.

Bundy looked back frequently.

"Ther durned critters are a-comin'," he finally announced.

"Let 'em come," said Joshua, defiantly, for his blood was fully up. "We are well armed, an' if we don't make them sick you can call me a liar."

"I am afraid, kind friends, that you will get into trouble in trying to help me," said Nora, gravely.

"Now, durn my buckskins, don't 'ee say it, marm," remonstrated Ben Bundy. "You ain't no clog, no more nor a full-blown angel, with a tin horn an' celluloid wings would be; not a bit en't. We honist men o' Colorado think it's an honor ter offer up our remains on ther gory battle field fur ther sake o' beauty an' shivery!"

"That's so, by gosh!" added the tenderfoot. Nora could say no more, and they went on as fast as was possible.

The shouts of the pursuers arose in the rear, but it was a hap-hazard chase. Owing to the darkness, and the intervening space, the mob had not sighted them, and Ben Bundy had no fear.

One thing, however, was against him. Every day since his arrival at the Bar, Joshua had gazed admiringly on the rugged side of the mountain, and Ben had looked upon it before that day; but neither of them had ever been there, personally, and though caves were said to be a common thing, it might not be so easy to find one.

They struck the base of the higher land at a point a little west of the Tiger Mine, and then the climb began in earnest.

Of course the pursuers gained rapidly then, and the trio were not far up the rocky ascent when a shout from below told them they were seen, and the flash of a rifle was followed by the report, and the whiz of the bullet only a few feet wild.

"Fire away," said Bundy, with a reckless laugh.

"By gosh! they don't want to be tew generous with their lead," said the tenderfoot. "My dad always told me economy was wealth, an' in this case it may be tew our health, tew."

There was no immediate danger for the fugitives, and Ben Bundy burred back fresh defiance as he saw the rapidity and skill with which Nora climbed upward.

She was doing wonderfully well, and the big miner took care to help her in order to preserve her strength.

In this way half a mile was covered without any perceptible advantage to Thayer's bloodhounds. They might at any time have been avoided by a slight deviation, for there had been no sign that the fugitives were seen after that one manifestation; but Bundy expressed scorn for them all, and they went on toward that point where they had planned to seek refuge.

The way grew extremely rough, but they pressed on steadily until far above Buzzard Bar and the pursuers were lost to sight and hearing.

On a wooded knoll they paused for breath and looked down on the mountain side and valley below. All was quiet and a deceitful aspect of peace was over the vicinity.

"I don't think we need ter fear ther miser'ble critters ter-night," said Bundy. "Ther dark is too thick."

"Yes, but it is also against us," said Nora. "We cannot find a cave or other place of refuge under these circumstances."

"Then we'll wait fur daylight," said Ben. "But, young feller, what'r you a-lookin' at?"

"Them rocks above is all broken intew pieces," said Josh, still using his eyes. "Maybe we can't find a cave now, but we can find some sort o' a hole tew hide in. Yeou two stay here an' let me look."

After a few more words he crossed a ravine, and striking another ridge, found himself in one of the wildest places he had ever seen. Gulches cut the mountain side, chasms and cliffs alternated along the way, and thick and tangled bushes made rare places of retreat.

He grew exultant at the prospect; even if no cave was found, it would be hard for the pursuers to discover them in such a place.

He found a retreat which pleased him, and turned to go back to his friends.

Not far had he gone, however, before the sight of a moving object just ahead brought him to a sudden halt. His first thought was that it was a wild animal, but a closer survey showed the form of a man.

On making this discovery, the tenderfoot nearly committed an indiscretion. He believed he was looking upon Ben Bundy, and he was about to uncover himself when caution prevailed and he stood still.

It was well to make sure of his man before uncovering.

The unknown came straight ahead, and Joshua shrunk back as he neared his cover. He came closer yet, and the youth could have touched him with his rifle.

Up to this point the man, who plainly was not Ben Bundy, had seemed wholly occupied with picking his way, but he suddenly wheeled

and in a moment more his grasp was upon the tenderfoot's arm.

"So I've got ye at last, you little snake!" he hissed; and in the face thus hovering over him Joshua recognized Sile Barker. "I'll smash ye inter powder, durn ye!"

Joshua saw a knife raised above him, and then, though he had at first cowered, all his courage returned, and he resolved to make a hard fight for his life.

He had before drawn his revolver, and with this he made a hard upward stroke, luckily hitting the fellow's arm as he had intended, and in a moment more the knife went flying through the air to fall rattling on the rocks below.

It was in a double sense a lucky blow; for, though Joshua did not know it, it partially disabled the bully's arm in the struggle which followed.

Our young friend promptly followed up his attack by attempting to push Sile from him down the bank; but he caught at Josh's arm as he went, and the two went rolling down, crashing over the bushes and getting more than one hard blow from the rocks.

Barker, however, maintained his hold, and when they came to a stop the battle begun in earnest.

Only for the ruffian's injured arm it would soon have been ended, for he was a muscular man in the prime of life; but as it was, Joshua twisted agilely from hold after hold, and several minutes passed without either gaining a perceptible advantage.

CHAPTER XIV.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

SUDDENLY the Boy Tenderfoot became aware that a new danger menaced one or both of them.

As he was whirled over in their rapid evolutions, he saw a vacant space beyond them and knew they were fighting on the brink of a precipice or, at least, of some sort of a cliff over which it was not wise to go.

He made a sudden rally, but just then Sile forced him forward and, for a moment, he felt his legs dangling in space.

He was hanging partially over the precipice!

The discovery aroused him, and catching at a bush which grew near the brink he made a great effort and drew himself back from the new peril.

The lull had given Barker a chance, however, and he threw his weight upon his young adversary with a fierce curse.

"I have you now!" he hissing added.

Joshua was filled with consternation; but he gathered his strength for one more effort, and dealt the ruffian a stinging blow in the face.

Instinctively the fellow recoiled from the stroke, and it gave the tenderfoot the chance he wanted.

Like a flash his knees came up almost to his chin, and in a moment more his feet were dashed into the stomach of his enemy.

He heard a muffled roar of rage, and then Sile went over backward and disappeared; but it was not until a wild cry of terror arose—seemingly far below—that Joshua realized what he had done.

"Good heavens! he has gone over the precipice!" exclaimed the panting victor.

Then he crept to where the rocks abruptly ended in a chasm and looked over, but no sound arose from the black abyss and, in the darkness, he could not tell how far he had fallen.

For a moment the tenderfoot was filled with horror and no one could have envied him as he lay shivering on the brink of the unknown space, but as he remembered what Sile Barker had been, and what he was trying to do, his nerve returned and he arose and started back toward his friends.

He had no longer a thought of taking them to the place he had just left, but, fortunately, there was no need of it. By a lucky chance, Bundy had found a small cave, and in this the trio were soon collected.

On the whole, the place was very favorable, in more ways than one, and Bundy proceeded to light a torch he had brought in from outside.

By its light, the three sat down to consult on the future.

"I'm in favor o' active war," said Bundy. "Thar will never be safety at ther Bar fur either on you'-uns until Thayer's crowd is wiped out, an' I know thar is enough decent men about town ter start a counter revival; so, when we git settled down hyer ter housekeepin', back ter ther Bar I'm a-goin' an' we'll see who runs the circus."

"Oh! sir, what do you think has become of

my poor Nemo? Do you suppose he is really dead?" asked Nora.

"I'mafeerd he is, mum. You say ther varmiuts shot at him at clost quarters an' he fell. That makes et look bad fur Nemer."

"Poor Nemo! And he was so faithful and brave."

"Lord! mum: we'll jest w'ar our buckskins off a-tryin' ter fill ther gap!" said Bundy, with energy. "We'll do it, too, or bu'st our patent leathers."

"That's so, by gosh!" said Joshua.

He did not think it necessary to tell Nora that Amanda Thayer had said that the unfortunate black had been thrown into the canyon—a place into which no creature could thus go and live through the fall.

A long consultation followed. It was clear that Nora and Joshua could not at present show themselves with safety. Leaving the "Lightning Kate" excitement entirely out of the question, the assassins hired by Jared Thayer would be numerous, and as Joshua was thoroughly identified with Nora's cause, he would be in as much danger as she.

Consequently, it was plain that they must keep out of sight for a while and allow Ben Bundy to act as scout.

"I'm goin' down inter ther town, ter-morrer, an' preach ter ther boyees, an' ef I find ther pot ready ter bile, you may look fur a split in ther Buzzard Bar p'litical party right away."

"You shall never be sorry for this if I can obtain my rights," said Nora.

"Bless your purty face! I sha'n't be sorry, anyhow. Why, my ole marm allays told me ter stand up fur ther right, an' I'm a-goin' ter do it ef all ther Gunnison stands on its hind legs an' howls for ha'r!"

There could be no doubt as to the sincerity of the rough miner, and even in her sorrow, Nora Barr gave him a dazzling smile. Not that she meant to turn his head, but such a smile came natural to her.

Only one event of importance occurred during the night. Once, as Bundy lay at the mouth of the cave, he saw a party of searchers not far away, but they failed to find the cave entrance.

The astute miner did not forget, however, that his young friends were without anything to eat, and after a conversation with them, he took his rifle and went out just at daybreak.

It was dangerous business to do any shooting at that time, but food must in some way be had.

A long time passed before his return and they had grown very anxious when, at last, he appeared with a huge package under his arm. He spread it out on the floor and showed them not only meat but bread, and a suspicious looking black bottle.

"I've been at ther Bar," he said, "an' all is lovely thar. Jed Thayer ain't got ther grip he had, an' ther boyees are beginning ter hate themselves for what they did last night. Jed can't muster nobody only what works in his mine, an' they report Sile Barker as strangely missin'. That reminds me, I found out that Nemer, yer darky, are alive an' not likely to turn up his toes. Old Job Briggs has got him in his cabin, an' though ther blacky are full of lead, he is gwine ter pull through."

"Thank heaven!" said Nora.

"Now, you two just be easy, fur I'm gwine ter ther Bar this arternoon an' start a counter-current—see ef I don't. Mebbe we'll see fit ter lynch Thayer."

Bundy stroked his beard benevolently, and Nora again thanked him warmly.

He picked up the black bottle and, informing them that it contained whisky, prevailed upon them to take a little to overcome any injurious effect the cave air might have upon them.

Noon came and passed and, soon after, Bundy took his rifle and started for Buzzard Bar. He left with words of cheer, but, despite this, Joshua was ill at ease.

All through the day the valley in front of the cave had been quiet and there had been no sign from Thayer's men.

From Joshua's point of view this very fact was suspicious in itself. Bundy had acknowledged that they were still abroad in the mountain, and, if this was so, why did they not search the locality where they were pretty sure the fugitives had once been?

Again and again the tenderfoot asked himself the question, but no satisfactory answer came.

After Bundy went for the last time, Joshua lay down at the entrance and remained with his eyes fixed upon the valley.

Perhaps an hour had passed when he suddenly became impressed by what looked to be a wild

belief. A little to the left was a thicket of small bushes, none of which were over five feet high, and in the center thereof was a rock of considerable size.

Several times the tenderfoot had looked at this thicket narrowly, because it would make such a good refuge for an enemy, and in this way he had fixed its position pretty clearly in his mind.

The idea which struck him after awhile was that this thicket had advanced several yards toward the mouth of the cave. As the suspicion first struck him he shoved his rifle a little further forward, scenting a trick, but not a person was visible, and a little further thought almost convinced him that his idea was absurd.

It might be possible to move a thicket, but how could a rock, weighing a ton or more, thus be made to walk?

Joshua almost smiled at the thought, but he was not easily blinded, and he kept his eyes on the suspicious spot.

He was soon rewarded, for he saw an unmistakable movement on the part of the thicket—it was advancing toward the cave!

Greatly astonished, he used his eyes once more, and this time more critically, and he was not long in perceiving that the object he had thought to be a rock was no more than a piece of cloth, partly concealed by the bushes.

Joshua would have been stupid indeed if he had not seen a trick in all this. Such dummies do not walk around in the Gunnison without an object or without help, and he at once decided that there must be some one behind the sham thicket.

He called to Nora and explained the situation to her.

"I can't see anybody," he concluded, "but, beyond a doubt, some o' the 'tarnal critters are behind the bushes. I calculate they see'd Roaring Ben when he was going in an' out, an' now they are trying tew steal upon us on the sly."

"What shall we do?" asked Nora, anxiously.

"Dew?" echoed Joshua. "Wal, my idee is tew lam them like sin if they don't git eout o' this vicinity!"

CHAPTER XV.

A HOLLOW PEACE.

THE BOY TENDERFOOT spoke bravely enough, but he was aware that he might yet have to fight against more than he could comfortably meet. So far, not an enemy had shown his head and their number was in doubt, but Joshua did not really feel at ease.

"I s'pose I might send a bullet intew them bushes an' wake them up," he said.

"But we don't want to open hostilities."

"We don't want tew be in a muss, anyhow, but I'm afeered we can't dodge it. See hyer, Miss Nora, these bushes grow mighty clost up around us—I b'lieve I can crawl out unseen an' then work my way round tew one side an' get a squint behind that dummy."

"Do as you think best. I will stand on guard and try to hold the fort."

"Yeou've got tew pistols?"

"Yes."

"Wal, I'll leave my gun, which will give yeou quite a battery, as Ben Bundy calls it. Keep sharp watch an' don't be afeered tew shute if they try tew be ugly."

"Rest assured that I shall defend myself," said Nora, firmly.

No further time was wasted. Joshua saw that the mysterious thicket had once more moved forward, and he at once left the mouth of the cave, twisted to the cover of the bushes and began his crawl to a proper place for observation.

His task was not an easy one, for the cave owed half its security to the fact that there was no good way of approach by stealth; but by making use of bushes and stones, he crept along without raising an outcry or other manifestation from the strangers.

The desired refuge and point of survey was soon reached.

Joshua saw what he had expected. Behind the counterfeit thicket was a quantity of human bodies, arms and legs, which soon resolved themselves into three men lying flat and advancing their cover by degrees.

The tenderfoot's eyes sparkled and he fingered his revolver nervously. By all the laws of warfare, anything he might do to these men who had caused him and his friends so much trouble would be no more than justice, and at that distance he could create a profound sensation among them, even if no one was killed.

For a moment he was swayed by the temptation, and then he resolutely thrust his revolver back in his belt.

"I ain't shot anybody in cold blood yet, an' I

won't begin now," he decisively said. "Them 'tarnal skunks deserve it an', mebbe, I'll be sorry fur holdin' my hand, bime-by, but I'll fight fair an' square while I can."

Having arrived at this decision he turned and made his way back to the cave. All was as he had left it, but Nora was growing somewhat excited over the steady approach of the counterfeit thicket, and she looked greatly relieved sight of her protector.

"I'm goin' tew stop that game," said the latter, coolly. "I'll show them darned shunks right away that they can't play blind man's buff on us, an' then they can dew what they please."

He picked up a good-sized pebble and hurled it with such accurate aim that it crashed through the bushes, knocked over one of them and disarranged others, whereupon Joshua broke into a laugh.

"Just see them sticks lop over, will you?" he said, still laughing. "Guess they ain't got many roots—Hello!"

The crack of a revolver broke the silence, and the bullet flattened against the rock near the tenderfoot's head.

He met the greeting without a sign of fear, but after a little his anger arose and he sent a return shot whizzing through the bushes. He half expected a rush on the part of the besiegers, but dead silence followed the shot and the thicket did not seem to move again.

"What next?" Nora dubiously asked.

"Darned ef I know," Joshua admitted; "but I guess we can see the hull circus by waitin' around here a spell."

"Don't get reckless. We must think coolly."

"That's about all we can dew. Them felers hold the key tew the stable, an' we can't go eout tew exercise unless they say so."

The youth spoke with the utmost coolness and unconcern, and no one would have taken him for a tenderfoot of two weeks' standing. Could it be the same boy who had crept timidly into Jack Magoffin's so short a time before, scarcely daring to say his soul was his own?

Yes, it could, and was. Joshua Pepper had not been changed in his cradle, or in any other place or way, within the fortnight, but he had caught the Colorado rush, and already felt like a veteran.

A period of inaction followed the slight show of hostility, but Joshua, keenly watching, was pleased to see that the counterfeit thicket had come to a standstill.

Were his enemies studying fresh mischief?

In the midst of his watching a familiar signal sounded, and then Roaring Ben Bundy appeared only a few rods away. He was in a position easily seen from the thicket, and Joshua at once began a series of warning gestures, but the miner, after a long look at the vicinity, came composedly forward.

"What ther blazes is ther matter with yer?" he asked. "Got ther jim-jams, or what?"

Joshua hurriedly explained the situation.

"Shoot me ef I see'd any human critters thar," said Ben. "I'll go an' see."

He strode boldly tow'rd the thicket, and though Joshua expected to see him drop at any moment, reached it unharmed, and then turned around to shake his head.

The motion meant that no one was there, and the tenderfoot was filled with surprise at the ease with which the strangers had deserted their post unseen by him; but Bundy soon came back.

"Ther blamed critters hev got up an' dusted," he announced. "Did you say you fired at them?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you drawed claret, that's all. I see'd red stains on ther leaves."

"Good gracious!" said Joshua, in consternation.

"Don't ye mew, boyee. They played with fire an' got burnt. Served 'em right. O' course they was Thayer's men, an' they thort they could take you onawares, but you held ther best keerds and they sloped."

"Have you been to the Bar, Mr. Bundy?" asked Nora.

"I have that, an' I've fixed things all squar'. Thar has been ther biggest powwow thar that ther civilized world has seen sence Pontiac's day. I talked to ther boyees an' two-thirds o' them are on our side, ter stay. We're gwine back, an' old beeswax, thar, that you call Jed Thayer, has got ter come ter tarms. Pistol Pete is with us, an' ther crowd says ef you owns ther Tiger Mine, marm, that you're a gwine ter hev it or thar will be a nitro-glycerine explosion o' ther greatest magnitude."

Roaring Ben delivered this address with nu-

merous and appropriate gestures, and by the time he was through Nora began to realize how much she owed him.

She caught his hand and uttered her thanks, and the veteran bore it bravely. Either he was of the stuff of which martyrs are made or else it did not worry him to have a pretty girl thus praise him.

Nora did not forget to add Joshua to her list of debtors, and then the trio prepared for the return to Buzzard Bar.

They went, and, half-way, were met by a score of miners led by Pistol Pete and Abe Norcross, the owner of the Eagle Mine, by whom they were escorted triumphantly to the village.

No one appeared to oppose them, but as they reached the first of the cabins they saw at one side a group of men who neither cheered nor threw up their hats.

"They are the workmen in Thayer's mine," explained Pistol Pete, turning to Nora. "The old man has closed the place, agreeably to our orders, to wait until the real ownership is decided, and those men yonder are out in the wet. They feel rather sour, but the breeze will soon blow the cloud over."

"It is strange that Thayer should close the mine," answered Nora.

Pistol Pete smiled quietly.

"Wa-al, he did vote against it at first, but Long Tom Barney held him and I shoved the sixes ag'in his temples while he thought the matter over. The result was he voted with us on every ballot, slick and clean, and when the case comes up it will go before a jury composed of Long Tom Barney, Jack Magoffin, Abe Norcross, and the best men in town. They're white, marm, and they'll see justice done if the Gunnison reeks with gore. You can bet on that right along!"

The eloquence of handsome Pistol Pete, and her peculiar situation, confused and nearly unnerved Nora Barr. Naturally very brave, she had come to the Gunnison prepared for war, and she had kept up her courage until the rough way of Jared Thayer had destroyed her courage; but now, when she was the weakest, the boldest measures were advocated by her new friends.

They carried her straight to Magoffin's and Pistol Pete and Ben Bundy took position in the bar-room to stay as a guard, but up stairs the girl was with friends she valued more.

On her arrival she was very much surprised to find Nemo there, and her heart was filled with joy when she saw that he was not badly injured.

He had been hit in the head by a bullet and stunned, on the previous night, and he was still weak, but with his frame he would gain rapidly.

The other friend was Joshua Pepper. In some way, Nora was strangely drawn toward the brave boy, and when he volunteered to see her through she gladly accepted his offer.

CHAPTER XVI.

THAYER STILL AGGRESSIVE.

THE remainder of the afternoon passed peacefully away, and everybody seemed occupied as usual excepting the workmen of the Tiger Mine who were thus given an undesired holiday.

They moved about the town in a surly, independent way, and the more observing among Nora Barr's supporters were not slow to perceive that they meant mischief.

Still, they kept their distance, and with Roaring Ben Bundy and pistol Pete to hold the bar-room and her other friends above, the girl felt tolerably brave and contented.

Jack Magoffin had come to the front as one of her stanchest supporters, but a man in his business must go with the current, and Magoffin bowed the lower before her as he reflected that she might yet learn some of his past moves against her, when Thayer ruled as king, in which respect Jack was only a man.

Nemo had taken a great liking to Joshua Pepper. The way in which the young eagle had shown his talons pleased the big black, and it was at his suggestion that Nora finally questioned the tenderfoot on his past and future, and ended by offering him a good situation when she gained her rights.

After that, Joshua had a double incentive to unceasing vigilance and he had an eye to all that was going on outside.

Darkness fell and Jack Magoffin's trade became brisk. In fact, he had never before seen it quite so good, and he dealt out the liquors with his blandest smiles and chuckled as he scooped in the golden gain.

Once, and once only—until the crash came—a

a shadow lingered for a moment around Jack's classic face. He had noticed that the full force of Tiger Mine employees were present, and as they outnumbered the other guests, Magoffin wondered what would happen if they got on the rampage.

Their behavior was excellent, however, and as the hour for closing drew near, the landlord grew correspondingly happy.

In the midst of this Eden-like scene, however, the door was suddenly pushed open and four men entered. The first was Dave French, the second, a burly stranger with a big, black beard, and the third and fourth, Messrs. Thayer and Foster, of the firm of that name.

Jack Magoffin stood like one suddenly turned to a statue. He "scented the battle, afar off, but very near," as he afterward expressed it.

The man with the black beard advanced a few steps and then paused.

"I am in search of one Joshua Pepper," he said, in a distinct voice, as he looked the crowd over.

"He don't live here," said Pistol Pete, promptly, as he blew a mouthful of smoke into rings. "Moved to Denver last week Wednesday, with his family. Opened an employment office for 'longshoremen' in Tabor's Block, I believe."

The stranger frowned.

"No trifling, sir," he said. "I am Sheriff Straw of Crested Butte, and I am here to arrest young Joshua Pepper."

"Oh! I thought it was the old man," said Pete, coolly. "Why, what's Josh been doing?"

"He has robbed Thayer & Foster of gold-dust worth five thousand dollars!" said the sheriff.

Then followed a dead silence, but every man was busy thinking. Jack Magoffin, on his part, felt a good deal like praying, but there were those who had more to dread.

Pistol Pete and Roaring Ben Bundy saw the whole plot at once. Thayer had been beaten off on Nora Barr, but he was resolved to have revenge on "Brindle Josh," to whom the girl owed her escape from the mine-holder's power.

In this emergency, arguments, entreaties and *alibis* would alike prove useless; the plaintiffs would carry their case through if they could, and as they had packed all their men inside the room, the chances were decidedly in their favor.

Pistol Pete, however, was not blind, nor did he believe in fooling around the case.

"Your little game is a charming one," he said, calmly, "but the sheriff part won't go down. You ain't Sheriff Straw no more than I am. You had better speak in your natural voice, Mike Sweet, and let the boys know you."

He had spoken the name of one of Thayer & Foster's workmen, for he had penetrated his disguise, and a jeer ran around the room as all saw the trick.

"That don't matter," said Thayer, belligerently. "We are here on business, and we are not to be bluffed. Josh Pepper has stolen five thousand dollars from us and we want the money back."

"The man that says I'm a thief is a darned liar!"

The words arose from the rear of the room, and then the Boy Tenderfoot strode forward a few paces, a flush of anger on his face.

"That's him!—that's Brindle Josh!" shouted Dave French.

"Yes, it's me!" retorted Joshua, "and I ain't ashamed on't, either. I ain't a—"

He paused abruptly. Indiscreet words, referring to the events of the previous night had been on his lips, but he choked them down.

"Mr. Sweet, take your prisoner!" said Thayer, in a loud voice.

"Hold on!" shouted Joshua, in a way which made the counterfeit sheriff pause. "Mr. Thayer dew yeou mean this charge in 'arnest?"

"Yes, sir, I do!" Thayer angrily answered.

"Yeou know it ain't true?"

"True? O' course it ain't! What does sech a miser'ble skunk as him want o' the truth? Lord, he wouldn't know it ef he met it face ter face in a meetin'-house!"

It was Roaring Ben Bundy who thus expressed his opinion of Thayer, and he did it because he saw plainly that a collision must come, and did not believe in fooling about the matter.

He brought matters to a crisis as he had expected, but the result was hardly pleasant.

Thayer uttered a sharp command, and at the word every employee of the Tiger Mine whipped out a revolver, and the smaller party found themselves against them.

Eighteen to thirteen, all told, was the count, and the larger party held the drop.

"If one of you attempt to draw you are

dead!" said Thayer, warningly; and then, as he saw that they did not stir, he burst into a laugh.

"Ha! ha! you poor miserable flunks!" he said, tauntingly; "I pity you, but I feel a good deal sorrier because we have such men on the soil of Colorado."

"What's the matter with us?" asked Pistol Pete.

"Why, you ain't got the wit of a louse!" said the mine-holder, contemptuously.

"Just you call off your bloodhounds a second and give me a show!" cried the insulted man, hotly. "Why, I'll blow your brains out in a squirrel's jump!"

"No shootin' hyar, gents; no shootin' hyar!" implored Jack Magoffin, from behind the bar.

He had worked rapidly all this while to stow his bottles and other fragile articles away where they could not get broken, for he anticipated a "moral earthquake," as he expressed it, on the good old Western plan.

At this moment Roaring Ben Bundy pushed to the front.

"If I may put in my lip," he remarked, "I would humbly suggest a compromise. Ther galoot that you want—Thayer—is a boyee—a kid o' some seventeen year. Now, we all like ter see fun, an' I propose that one o' your gang lay hold o' ther accused an' pull him out bodily while ther rest on us stand by an' hold their bunnits. O' course, ter make ther scuffle fa'r, you must send in yer youngest man. That's him!"

And Bundy leveled his finger at Dave French.

The ex-cowboy was for a moment startled at the suggestion, for he had tried the prowess of "Brindle Josh" before then to his sorrow, but even his own friends shouted at the idea, and he dared not object.

The majority of men like to see a contest of the kind, and as the Tiger employees were all sure that Dave could walk right over the angular tenderfoot, they decided that rare sport was in store for them.

"Go ahead, Dave, and take him out," whispered Foster, "and if you can contrive to break his ugly head while you're about it, I'll back you up."

Dave put on a ferocious scowl and advanced toward the Boy Tenderfoot, while a pensive smile began to quiver around the corners of Pistol Pete's mouth. He had seen the two youths pitted against each other before, and he was not only sure that Joshua would contrive to look out for himself, but there was also a good-sized chance that the Tiger crowd would lose the drop before the act was over.

If they didn't, Pistol Pete was ready to forfeit his title.

Dave had cut down half the distance when Jack Magoffin ventured to raise his weak voice from behind the bar to suggest that both boys lay aside their weapons until the affair was over; and the motion was seconded and carried through the house.

Once more the old foes faced each other.

Dave French had nerved himself for the fight and he was resolved to conquer and pay off old scores or get uncomfortably whipped.

The pride of the tenderfoot must come down into the dust, or somebody get too badly hurt to attend the next lynching affair in store for Buzzard Bar.

CHAPTER XVII.

BUZZARD BAR'S BIG NIGHT.

"BRINDLE JOSH" awaited the coming of his enemy with outward coolness, but it was a situation that called on his nerves direct. In his previous encounters with the ex-cowboy he had been in the heat of passion, but now he was to meet him coolly, as though in a regular ring.

It seemed an unequal fight, with the odds of two years in favor of Dave French, but Joshua stood firm and resolved to use all the tricks of the old Frenchman, who had taught him so well.

Dave advanced with a terrific scowl on his face, and, going quite near, made a motion as though to put his hand on the tenderfoot's shoulder, but, suddenly changing his position, he shot out his clinched fist in a terrible blow straight at his head.

The trick nearly cost Joshua dearly; he had been led to believe that Dave intended a grapple; and when the blow came he barely had time to pass it over his shoulder, and then his foot slipped, and he fell sideways to the floor.

A tremendous howl arose from the Tiger gang. Not one of them was fair enough to see that the fall was the result of a slip, and as their cheers rang out Dave gained new and reckless courage.

He made a dive for his adversary, lying as

the latter did on the floor, but, somehow, the Boy Tenderfoot slid away from his grasp, and then, arising, caught at Dave's legs and raised him bodily from the floor.

One moment everybody held their breath, and then, with a tremendous effort, Joshua cast his victim aside, and he fell in the crowd, nearly knocking over one of the Tiger men.

Still that was only a beginning. Dave was stung to fury by his discomfiture, and with a series of wild curses he rushed forward with doubled fists.

He reached Joshua and struck out fiercely, but in a moment more the latter dodged serenely under the hostile arm, and stood with a smile awaiting for his adversary to turn.

"Oh! bring us a *man*!" yelled Roaring Ben Bundy. "Send out eight or ten on 'em with each one's fightin' weight. Take this stick in an' treat him for colic.—Hurrah! I told you so!"

The last exclamation came as Dave French went down like a log, knocked off his feet by a blow three-fourths science and the rest strength; but the cheer of the miner suddenly died away.

Pistol Pete had anticipated the result of the fight from the first, and he knew Jared Thayer had not enough honor to abide by it; he would press his claim even though Brindle Josh whipped the whole crowd of Tigers at once.

Knowing this, Pete had only been waiting for Josh to gain a decisive advantage, and when that time came he played his own part.

While they fought he had managed to draw his revolver unseen by the Tigers, and as Dave went down there were two reports in rapid succession and the room was plunged in darkness.

Pistol Pete had played the old trick of shooting out the lights.

Another moment and his hand was on the tenderfoot's arm.

"Back!—Get out of the room!" he hissed.

Joshua caught the idea quickly and they began to make for the stairway, but at that moment the voice of Foster rung out sharply:

"Tigers this way! Fire to the front!"

Pistol Pete knew what it meant, but he was not a man to be taken unawares. He forced Joshua to the floor, and then several lumps of lead whistled over them.

There were other sounds, too—cries of rage and pain, and one heavy fall, which showed that all the lead had not gone astray.

"Up the stairs, quicker'n lightning!" continued Pistol Pete, and then they moved together.

They heard another man just ahead of them, but, without trying to secure the door, which at the best would stand but little pressure, they ran up the stairs.

At the top Nemo met them with a light, his dusky face full of battle-fire, and in his hand the revolver which he well knew how to use.

Pistol Pete saw that the man who had preceded them was Ben Bundy and his own hopes arose. He caught the light from Nemo's hand and set it down near the head of the stairs.

"Now, fall back, all of you," he said, "and we will face the gap at twenty feet. If we four can't hold the fort at that range, I'm a liar!"

They caught at his idea and secured their places. Bundy tipped over a table and he and Pete turned it into an impromptu breastwork; while Joshua and Nemo brought chairs into the game.

Then, with their gazes on the top of the stairs, and their revolvers ready, they grimly waited for further developments, and it would really have been a man brave to wild recklessness who would have dared their fire knowingly.

In the lower room, quite a circus seemed in progress. There had been some shooting, and a suspicious crashing of glass as though some of the miners had gone out through the windows, and then loud voices and angry cries—then utter silence.

"There's mischief in that silence," said Pistol Pete.

"What does it mean?" Bundy asked.

"Mischief, I tell you, sure as you live. A lull like that is suspicious, whether it speaks for white men or red."

Joshua looked over toward Nora. She sat in a chair facing them and the stairs, and her bravery thrilled him. He felt an admiration too great to be easily stifled, but it was not a time for words.

As he turned back his mind received a new impression. The scent of smoke reached his nostrils. For a moment he felt no alarm, and he almost smiled as he thought that the wild men below had probably overturned the stove;

but fast on the heels of that theory came two new ideas—might not the hotel be burnt by that fire; or, worse still, perhaps the Tiger gang had intentionally fired the building!

The latter idea startled him.

He turned to see Pistol Pete snuffing the air. "Pete," he cried, "there is smoke in the air. I believe they have set the house on fire."

A bitter exclamation fell from the man's lips.

"They're the dogs to do anything, but it would be simply fiendish," he said.

"Thar is sart'nly smoke in ther air," said Bundy.

"Ay, and this hotel is on fire!" said Pete, leaping to his feet. "The cowardly hounds have taken this way of getting at us. Jed Thayer thinks all his enemies will die in one holocaust."

"By gosh, we won't!" said Joshua, with equal vigor. "My dad always told me I was good fur a hundred, like my ancestors, an'—"

The remainder of the tenderfoot's reminiscence was lost to the world as a brighter light suddenly illuminated the room, and the flames burst out at one side of the wall.

The last doubt was removed, and the little party knew they had to fight another foe than the Tigers.

Pistol Pete rushed to the window and threw it open. The men of the Bar were collected all around, but contrary to his expectations, no shot greeted him, and it looked as though the way of escape was open.

Ben Bundy had gone half-way down the stairs, far enough to see that the lower room was all in flames, and being met by the red tongues and a cloud of smoke, he came hurriedly back.

"It's ther winder or nowhar," he said.

"How shall we go?" asked Pistol Pete, looking at Nora. "We haven't a rope."

"You an' me will go first an' then ketch her," said Ben, interpreting the look.

"By gosh! we had better be startin' right away," added Joshua, as the smoke poured up the stairway in renewed profusion.

Pistol Pete seized a chair and dashed out the window, sash and all.

The way of retreat was open.

"Go first," said Bundy, "an' keep your shooters ready. I'll foller right arter."

Pete did not demur. He knew that if the crowd below was in a violent mood, the first to go would stand a chance of dying immediately after, and he was a man who never hesitated to take risks.

He had his faults, but he was a brave man.

Seizing the sill of the window he swung himself out, hung for a moment, and then dropped to the ground.

He alighted with a revolver in each hand, but no one stirred to molest him.

Ben Bundy quickly followed.

By that time, however, the progress of the fire was alarming. A few minutes more and Magoffin's hotel would be lying flat. Woe be to any person who might remain inside.

Suddenly a shout arose from the crowd. The Boy Tenderfoot had appeared at the window holding Nora in his arms, but close beside them the red flames were lapping the woodwork.

"Drop her!" yelled Pistol Pete; and the crowd took up the cry and thundered it out with thrilling force.

Joshua did not hesitate. In the red glare his face looked pale, but the mouth bore an expression of great firmness.

He released his hold, and Nora dropped toward the uplifted arms of Pete and Bundy.

At that moment, however, a loud, shrill whistle arose from the crowd, a rifle cracked, and Joshua reeled back and disappeared in the smoke and flames.

Almost at the same moment, too, the nearest of the crowd sprung like tigers upon Bundy and his ally, and in a moment more Nora was torn from their grasp, and both men were beaten to the ground.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLAYING THE TRUMP CARDS.

THE cowardly attack upon the two men was the prologue for a general fight. There were men in that crowd—Dave French and the Tiger employees—who had sworn to fight for Thayer and Foster to the last, and there were those just as ready to use their weapons in defense of Nora Barr.

All drew together, and then the stout men plunged into a *melee* which may as well go undescribed here. Revolvers and knives were freely used, wild angry cries arose from the

combatants, and in the midst of it all the roof of the house fell with a crash and smoke and cinders arose plentifully.

Magoffin's hotel was a thing of the past.

There was little fighting after that. The men drew back, each one began to look to his bruises and wounds, and it was five minutes before any one thought of systematic action.

When such a course was taken it was found that all of Thayer's adherents had slipped away from the spot. All? No; for Foster and one other man lay dead on the ground.

Not far from them, Pistol Pete and Ben Bundy seemed in the same condition, but a little attention brought both back to life. The former had a severe cut on the head, but Bundy was merely bruised.

His first call was for Nora Barr.

Where was she? No one had seen her since the fight began, and it was pretty clear that she had been carried away by Thayer's men.

"But Brindle Josh an' ther darky?" cried Roaring Ben.

Ay, what of them? The Boy Tenderfoot had reeled back from the assassin's shot, probably fatally wounded, into that fiery pit where Nemo still was, and since then no one had seen them.

"My God!" said Bundy, "they are burnt in ther flames!"

It was a natural conclusion, but in thus thinking the miner was mistaken.

Let us follow the fortunes of "Brindle Josh."

When he reeled back from the cowardly shot from the crowd, he was not by any means badly injured. The shot had been poorly sped; it struck the side of the window instead of the boy; but a splinter of wood was dashed violently in his face and he instinctively jumped back.

Another moment and the fight began in the crowd, and Josh and Nemo hesitated, but, seeing Dave French and some of the Tigers making off with Nora, both of her friends leaped from the burning building, and, as soon as they could get clear of the crowd, started in pursuit.

The abductors, however, had disappeared.

Greatly excited, Joshua and Nemo went on, looking eagerly to the right and left, and while thus engaged they came upon a single man. One glance showed Joshua that he was a stranger, but Nemo uttered a shout of surprise and joy.

"Bress de Lord!" he said, "it am my ole massa—it am Massa Barr!"

And then the new-comer grasped the negro's hand, and the faithful fellow fell on his knees.

"Praises be to de Lord!" continued Nemo. "I is so glad to see you, sah. I tought you was dead, fo' sure.

"I have been, but I am resurrected," was the reply. "Nemo, where is Ben Bund?"

"Dead, sah. He was shot at de house."

"Dead!" echoed the man, in a voice of horror.

Joshua was looking on in wonder. He realized that this old, white-haired man was the father of Nora Barr, but more he could not understand.

Suddenly, Barr aroused.

"Come with me, Nemo—and you, sir, if money can hire you. My daughter is in the hands of Jared Thayer and her life depends on her prompt rescue."

"Money can't hire me!" said Joshua, with emphasis, "but I'm in the battle jest the same. Lead the way an' I'll foller."

Barr turned toward the wood. Excited words passed between them all, and some mysteries were explained which must be told the reader a little later.

In the shadow of the wood, Randolph Barr showed the "Tigers" to his friends. Thayer had halted his force there to wait for morning, when he intended to make a bold push for his former powerful position. He believed Joshua, Nemo, Pistol Pete and Bundy dead, and with their end would cease the existence of his worst enemies.

The Boy Tenderfoot, however, was alive and thoroughly on the alert. Leaving his companions, he went on a scout. He found Nora tied to a tree, with the "Tigers" all about, but they depended on her bonds and the watch was poorly kept.

Joshua resolved to attempt to once more wrest the girl from under Thayer's very nose. To do this he must run great risk, but he was not one to hesitate.

He boldly entered the camp of his enemies. The darkness and underbrush were in his favor, and without trouble he reached Nora's side. He cut her bonds and the first step was taken, but would she succeed in getting out of the camp as well as he had got in?

Anxious moments were those in the lives of both, but the last of the abductors was at last

passed and Nora was clasped in the arms of her father.

That interview can better be imagined than described, but the voice of Randolph Barr was unsteady as he turned to Joshua and said:

"How much we owe you, young sir, I do not yet fully know, but enough has been told to make me say, from the bottom of my heart, you have saved the life of one dearer to me than all the world besides."

Before Joshua could answer, Nemo came from the edge of the wood to say that a body of men were approaching from the direction of Buzzard Bar. They met them, and found the party led by Ben Bundy, and all wild to get at the "Tigers," and our friends pointed out the location of the camp and went aside.

We need not describe what followed. There was another fight, and when it was ended Jared Thayer and Dave French were done with life.

A few words more and we are at the end.

Randolph Barr and Paul Wilbur did not die by the hands of the assassins at Barrel Canyon. They survived both the bullets and the fall, thanks to the pine tree-tops upon which they fell, and though Barr was desperately hurt, the young prospector nursed him back to life in a mountain cave.

Before he was able to travel, Wilbur, disguising himself as Roaring Ben Bundy, went to the Bar. One night he entered Thayer's house, to secure the forged deed of the mine made out for Thayer & Foster by the rascally lawyer; but Joshua innocently baffled his attempt.

He was at first bitter against the boy, but when he came out so nobly for Nora, became one of his best friends. No one except Barr knew that he was other than Ben Bundy until after the whole affair was settled.

Mr. Barr himself, worried by Wilbur's long absence, had come to the town while still weak from his injuries, and had fallen in with Joshua and Nemo as we have just related.

A brighter day dawned on Buzzard Bar. The "Tigers" were gone, and Thayer and Dave French would do no more mischief.

Only Jack Magoffin bewailed, and he grew brighter when Mr. Barr promised to build him another hotel.

Sile Barker was found among the mountains, lying where Joshua had pushed him over the ledge, and before he died he confessed that it was Dave French and himself, hired by Thayer, who so narrowly missed killing Barr and Wilbur at Barrel Chasm.

Peace fell upon the Bar.

The true owner of the "Tiger" started the mine afresh, with Paul Wilbur for superintendent and Joshua as an important feature. All our friends knew that their happiness was chiefly owing to the "Boy Tenderfoot," and Mr. Barr declared that all his power should be used to pay the debt.

Pistol Pete abandoned some bad habits he had and went into the mine also.

Amanda Thayer fled from the Bar, and returned no more.

There is a rumor that Nora is to become the wife of Paul Wilbur; but whether or not that is so, we have traced to a happy point the fortunes of the "Boy Tenderfoot."

THE END.

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